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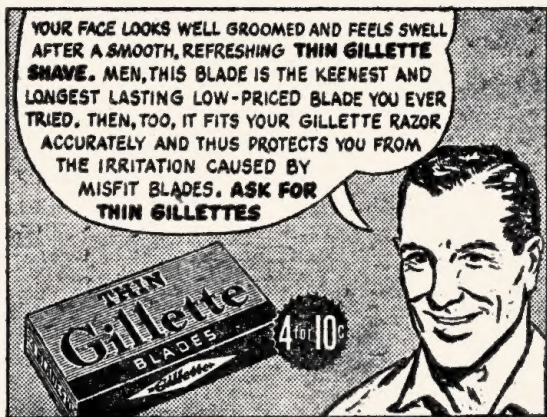
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44 Western

MAGAZINE

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Vol. 19

Contents for November, 1947

No. 1

- THE DRIFTER'S ONE-MAN WAR**.....William R. Cox 8
A nice peaceful range was all he wanted, so that lead-slinging Sammy Stewart let himself slide down the face of the butte, a target for Crippled Elk bullets, in a feud he never made, wished no part of, and was signed on to finish or die!
A Novel
- NIGHT COACH TO RAWHIDE**.....Dan Cushman 25
On three little words: Who? When? Where? depended Griff Sterrett's life and the future of a rich cattle-land.
A Short Story
- RIDE THE DEVIL'S DEATH-WATCH**.....Joseph Chadwick 32
The brand of Cain etched on his chest and a Winchester steel-jacket in his back, Jim Marlowe faced a kill-hungry combine, sided only by a broken, crippled-up old man and a herd of crow-bait longhorns!
A Novel
- A KILLER FOR CHRISTMAS**.....Barry Cord 49
Sheriff Thompson rode out to collect his last Christmas gift—wrapped in the red-hot lead of sixes.
A Short Story
- GHOST TOWNS GO WEST!**.....Dave Sands 57
Rhyolite, Nevada, built a station before it had a railroad, a school before it had children—and was turned back to the desert before the ink was dry on its city charter!
Historical Fact Article
- BRAND HIM TINHORN**.....Michael Oblinger 58
Trapper Clate Donaghue drew a bob-tailed flush in a sky-high game, on a mad-man's chance to win a fortune—or lose both his partner and his life.
A Novel
- WHITE BUFFALO MAGIC**.....John T. Lynch 72
Those redskins knew they had strong medicine in that white buffalo skin—when they rode against the pale-faces at Adobe Walls.
Thrilling Fact Article
- WAR CRY OF THE WILDERNESS KING**..Harold F. Cruickshank 73
Satan, king wolverine, battled the wolf-pack to the death, then, with killer-instinct still strong, turned to face the man.
A Short Story
- YANKEE GOLD BUYS TEXAS HELL!**.....James Shaffer 80
Called a turncoat prodigal, Captain Wes Holbrook, late of the Union Army, found himself the fatted calf at his own home-coming—and earmarked for bush-whack slaughter!
A Novel
- TRAIL BLAZERS OF THE FRONTIER**.....Cedric W. Windas 6
That cattleman-turned-banker, Ed Lawson, paid off the Loomis gang in the coin of Col. Colt.
Frontier Fact Feature

NEXT ISSUE OUT OCTOBER 17th!

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TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



Not all the frontier town bankers were the scheming villains the movies would have us believe. Ed Lawson, ex-cattleman turned banker, was a first class frontiersman who never let business interfere with adventure. In April 1882, the Henry Loomis gang decided to rob Lawson's bank in Silver City, New Mexico.



Lawson might have let them get away with the money, but they shot Ed's assistant in wanton brutality. Ed refused to stand by and let the killers get away with murder. He scooped up a bag of silver dollars and knocked one bandit cold. Grabbing the fallen outlaw's gun, the plucky banker shot Loomis, the gang leader, through the chest, killing him instantly.

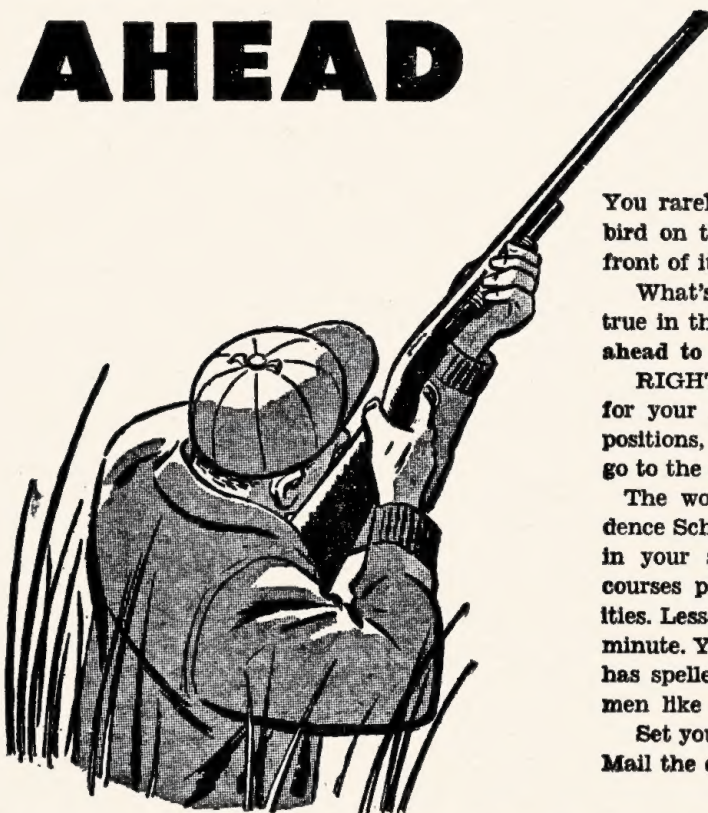


A third bandit, guarding the door, wounded Lawson in the thigh. Ed fell, but kept on shooting, and in the exchange of shots broke his opponent's arm and jaw. Ed then dragged himself to the doorway and opened fire on the fourth renegade, who was outside the bank holding his accomplices' horses ready for the getaway.



This hombre deemed discretion the better part of valor, and tried to escape. But the ruckus had brought Silver City's marshal and several irate citizens to the scene. The fleeing outlaw was captured. Lawson arranged for his assistant's funeral, had his own wound dressed, and calmly went on about his day's work at the bank.

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The bullets whistled past
as he plunged into the
pool.

"I'm just a sucker for a nice peaceful range!" Sam Stewart reminded himself, clinging to the rope over the butte edge, while he became a target for Crippled Elk bullets, in a feud he never made, wished no part of, and was signed on to finish or to die!

THE DRIFTER'S ONE-MAN WAR

By
William R. Cox



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Hard-Riding Novel of the Old West

CHAPTER ONE

Sixgun Hootnanny

TOWARD EVENING the town began to brighten, and Sam Stewart knew there was a celebration of some kind. He stabled his horse behind the Prairie Dog Hotel. Across the street was the Prairie Dog Bar, and there he bent his steps.

The post office was alongside the bar. The tall stranger detoured for a moment, stepping inside. The dodgers on the wall were fly-specked; ugly faces leered down at him. He read them all carefully, sighed and stepped back out upon Main Street.

Sunrise was a one-street town, but it was prosperous. There were two, grain and feed emporiums, two small banks, two of everything, it seemed. This was lush cattle country, containing Razor and Crip-

MAN WAR

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pled Elk, the two biggest ranches in the Territory.

There was only one amazing thing about Sunrise. There were not two saloons. There was only the huge, two-storied Prairie Dog Bar. Sam shook his head and pushed open the swinging doors.

He saw immediately that there was indeed a shindig of some kind. The long mahogany bar was lined with the citizenry of the Sunrise country. Sam Stewart shaded his eyes, blinking at the assorted reds, purples, greens of the silken shirts upon the backs of scrubbed and combed cowmen.

A man came forward and appraised Sam's lean length, his faded blue shirt, his wrinkled riding pants. His gaze lingered on the stitched boots which had cost fifty dollars in El Paso, made to order. This was a large man, rubicund, stout, with pleasant blue eyes and greying hair. His mustache drooped over a wide, humorous mouth. On his ornate, flowered vest a shining gold star glittered.

"Howdy, stranger. Step up and libate yo'self. I'm Sheriff Tom Carew," he said.

Sam Stewart said politely, "Thank you, sir. Seems like there is a shindig pendin'."

"Honor of m' daughter," beamed the sheriff. "Twenty-one today, she is. The hull county's here for the party."

Sam said, "Seems like a fine charvaree."

"Oh, she ain't marryin', not yet," chuckled the sheriff. His blue eyes twinkled. He whispered, "That's why so many men done turned out. I didn't get yore name, stranger."

"I didn't tell yuh," said Sam solemnly. "It's Stewart. From Texas."

"If yuh don't drink," said Carew, "Go down an' change yore stuff an' show up at the schoolhouse. It's an early party and it lasts late."

Sam said, "How'd you know I don't drink?"

"Yuh didn't zackly knock nobody down acceptin' my offer," beamed the sheriff. "Yuh're jest in off a ride . . . oughta be thirsty. Passin' through?"

"Mebbe," said Sam. He was aware that he was being interrogated by the law, but the stout sheriff knew how to make it painless. He knew suddenly that beneath that good nature and the pleasant exterior lurked a canny, sharp lawman.

"Waal, there is plenty work here if a man wants it," said Carew heartily. "Sun-

rise is a growin' community, glad t' git new, young blood. See y' later, Stewart." He nodded and went back to join a group at the bar.

Sam stood against the wall, his sombrero tilted over his nose, watching. He was immediately aware that there were two groups in the Prairie Dog Bar. One milled about the sheriff. The other stayed carefully at the far end of the bar, faces averted.

But when the sheriff had spent a few moments laughing with the one crowd, he disentangled himself and joined the other. Then the fanfare and noise went down to the far end, following the genial lawman.

Two of everything in Sunrise, Sam mused—except saloons—and sheriffs. And, he would bet, only one sheriff's daughter. He knew enough about the set-up to pick out the leaders of the two factions.

The Bull brothers, two giants who owned Razor; towered above their riders. They were square-faced, black-haired, good looking men in their early thirties, and very similar in appearance. Razor was a great ranch, famed for its cross-bred cattle all over the Southwest.

Oley Swenson, who owned Crippled Elk, was also easily identified. His Swedish face and coloring, high cheekbones, florid complexion and angular, powerful frame stood out in his own group of tough cowboys.

Sam knew about the two big ranches—but he had not known the owners were feuding. It gave him food for thought. He turned and left the Prairie Dog Bar and went across to the Prairie Dog Hotel. At the desk he asked the elderly clerk who owned the hostelry.

"Sheriff Carew," was the proud answer.

"And he owns the bar, too?" asked Sam.

"Surtain. And a feed store and one bank," cackled the ancient. "Ole Tom, he aims to have a lil bit of everythin'. Smartest man in Sunrise county."

"Yeah," mused Sam. There was a faraway look in his eye. "Reckon you're plumb right." He took his key and went upstairs. The rooms, unlike those of other western hotels, were high-ceilinged and spacious—and clean. There was water in the pitcher, slightly warm. There was actually a piece of soap. On the dresser was a stitched doily. Sam goggled at such luxury. He twitched out of his shirt and trousers and

poured the water. The soap even smelled good! He bathed with pleasure.

He unpacked his roll and took out his Sunday clothes, white shirt, black tie, black pants. It was too warm for a coat and anyway his was too wrinkled. He donned a lightweight black-and-white checked vest. He hefted his gun belt with its black-handled Colt. Sighing, he put it on a peg. He selected a small, innocent-seeming deringer instead and slid it into a capacious, leather-lined hip pocket built into the trousers.

He went out into the hall, whistling. Sunrise seemed a likely place. He was at the head of the stairs when a girl came out of a room in the rear of the second floor and said, "Please, no whistling in the halls."

He removed his hat, looking at her. She was a small girl, in a gingham dress, with a rag around her head. She had a tip-tilted nose and her mouth was round and saucy. Her chin was very firm. She regarded him gravely, but with infinite confidence.

He said, "I'll bet a cookie you're Miss Carew."

"We try to keep this hotel quiet. And respectable," she said, but there was no sharpness in her tones. She was regarding Sam with interest.

He had curly hair, which he cropped close in despair. He had a cleft in his chin, which he cursed daily when he shaved. He was extremely handsome, a fact which irked him grievously and had caused him many a fight.

The girl said, "However, I must say you whistle tunefully. Was that tune called 'Come To The Fair'?"

He whistled a few bars, throwing in the trills. She clapped her hands. She seemed to have forgotten her admonition. "All of it," she commanded.

He stood, hat in hand, and whistled the gay tune for her. When he had finished, she said, "Mr. Stewart—I read your name on the register, of course—when they play that tune tonight, I want you to dance with me—and whistle it for me as we dance. Will you do it? I dare you!" She laughed, throwing out her hands in an incredibly graceful gesture. She said, "You'll do it. I know you will." She turned and went back down the hall. At the door to the rooms in the rear, she paused, laughed merrily

again, and saucily waved toward him.

IT WAS a good deal like a Texas party. There was a fiddler, a piano player, a table groaning with lemonade, punch with wine for the more daring ladies, and a barrel of whiskey in the yard, where pitch torches gave off an eerie, flickering light and the men gathered in groups.

The Razor crowd drank while the Crippled Elk riders danced and vice versa. Sam lingered in the shadow, watching the Bull brothers. The big, handsome men swaggered, but were not boisterous. Elegantly attired, they wore their best manners. Jake was the elder and the leader, Hardie was the younger and gayer. Jake drank the whiskey moderately, when it was demanded of him—Hardie lushed it up a bit. Their riders looked like competent men.

Oley Swenson was dancing with the Sheriff's daughter. Through the wide open doors and windows the pair could be seen whirling around the floor in a swift Lancer. Susan Carew was more than pretty, Sam thought now.

The yellow-haired Swede's bony face was horse-like so close to the radiant, delicately tanned skin of the girl. Her shoulders, high and wide for such a short girl, bloomed from a white party dress. Swenson held her very tight and talked to her intensely while they danced. She kept her head averted, and it was no secret that Swenson was making love to her. She neither accepted nor resented it, Sam saw.

Hardie Bull walked near a window and stood staring. His brother, near the whiskey barrel called him. Hardie shoved his hand out in resentment and said audibly, "Some day yuh won't be able to stop me takin' that Swede apart. He'll keep on messin' with my gal. . . ."

"She's not yore gal and come away from that winder," said Jake Bull sharply.

Hardie never budged. Sam went a little deeper into the shadows. The music stopped. Crippled Elk riders drifted tentatively for the door, their eyes on the Swede. Swenson reluctantly took Susan Carew to a seat among the matrons of the town. The Crippled Elk crowd came out and stood stiffly, awaiting the departure of the Razor bunch from the whiskey. This, Sam saw, was Sunrise etiquette. Looming behind them all was the large, hearty figure of the sheriff, whose blue eyes were at once watch-

ful and coldly humorous seeing everything.

Hardie Bull said, drawling his words so all could hear, "Let the sons wait. I'm needin' another smile. Pass the dipper, Pascoe."

A hard-faced rider walked across the schoolyard, a tin dipper of whiskey in his hand. Jake Bull said, "Now, Hardie . . ."

But the elder brother did not take his eyes from the Crippled Elk crowd. Oley Swenson was coming through the door. Seeing his gang stiffly waiting, indignation riding them, the big Swede paused. His lantern jaw assumed the proportions and firmness of a tombstone.

Sam Stewart took a step forward, sensing the impending strife. It would be a shame to spoil the girl's party, he thought, and a second later wondered why he bothered. She was a flagrant flirt, he could see. . . .

Hardie Bull, lowering the dipper, spotted the white shirt in the blackness. He said sharply, "Who's thar? Come out, ye skulker."

Every eye swivelled to where Sam Stewart walked slowly forward.

Hardie Bull said in that cutting voice, "This looks like one of Swenson's imports. The Rio Kid, mebbe."

In the doorway, the Swede did not move. Sam Stewart let the light from within fall on his decorously clad figure. It was plain to all that, like all the men at the party, he did not wear a gun in view.

Hardie Bull said, "We heard he was sendin' for the Rio Kid, didn't we, Jake? He's got Denver Post over thar and with another gun-slinger he figgered he'd be tough. This jasper sure must be the Rio Kid." Hardie's voice slurred a little as the whiskey took hold.

Sam Stewart said, "Is it the custom hereabouts to pin names on strangers drop-pin' in to a dance?"

Jake Bull said, "Take it easy, Hardie."

The younger brother crowded forward, close to Stewart. Their eyes were on a level, but Hardie was much the heavier man. Hardie said, "Strangers hereabouts take one side or the other—Razor or Crippled Elk. Or they move on. You're sich a purty boy, you better move on."

Sam Stewart, being a non-drinker, disliked the sour smell of whiskey breath. He reached out and gently shoved Hardie Bull. The push sent Bull back three or four feet.

Sam said, "You heard your brother. Take it easy."

Hardie Bull's answer was prompt. He swung a heavy right fist at Sam's head. Moving in, he displayed the footwork of a pugilist, driving his left fist upward.

In the doorway, Swenson started, then stood rigid, watching, his guttural voice uttering only two words to his men, "Not now!"

Sheriff Tom Carew took a rolling step, then paused, as though balancing on a wire. Men blocked the windows so the women could not see what was taking place.

Sam Stewart ducked the right hand, but the skillful left sunk into his brisket. He gasped for breath, side-stepping. His own fists lashed out. He was no boxer, but his muscles were smooth and lithe. His left fist caught Hardie's ear and the heavier man spun. Jake Bull, staring with unbelieving eyes, strode toward the two men. Few had survived Hardie Bull's practised attack to return a blow. Sam's swift hands plied rapid punches which drove Bull to his high heels. Hardie stumbled.

Sam stepped back to give his adversary a chance to recover. As he did so, Pascoe, the tough rider, kicked sharply at Sam's ankle.

Sam doubled with the pain. Jake Bull reached out a long arm and cuffed him. He went sideways into Hardie Bull. He tried to gain his balance, throwing his arms wide.

Hardie Bull hit him, once, twice, three times. He went full length onto the grass, rolled over and over. He came to his feet with the lightness of a puma. His hand started for the rear pocket where the small gun nestled, then came away, clenched. He sprang six feet through the air to land close to Hardie Bull. He said through clenched teeth, "All of you—one at a time, yellow-livers!" He threw two haymakers. One landed on Hardie's jaw. It was the best wallop of the mêlée. Bull went down and lay still.

Jake and Pascoe closed in. Between them Sam fought, but they were merciless. The other Razor riders came charging, Monte, Miguel and the Taylor brothers. Among them he swung his fists—and took a beating.

A voice boomed as he was going down beneath their itching boots. "That'll do."

Yaas, indeed, *Dammit, Stop!* Yuh hear?"

Amazingly, they stopped. Sam rolled away from them and again made that agile move which brought him erect. The Sheriff stood on the steps, with the Crippled Creek crowd behind him, still immovable and silent. In his hand was an old Peacemaker, a single action Colt with an eight inch barrel. The Bull brothers backed away, their riders spread out, their faces ireful, but their demeanor cautious.

"Hate t' break up a good fight," said Carew cheerfully. "But seein' as yawl ain't got guns and I have, reckon I kin do it."

"Y' saw him hit Hardie," snarled Jake Bull. "No son kin hit Hardie an' git away with it. I'll have his hide if it's the last thing I ever do."

Carew purred, "I seen it all, Jake. From the start. Heard Hardie call this boy Rio Kid. Now yawl know I'd have the Rio Kid in the hoosegow if he showed here. Cain't unnastand you boys sometimes. S'pose you Razor lads light a shuck now."

Jake Bull bawled, "We ain't even danced yet, Tom. This yere stranger cain't run us offen Susan's party."

"He ain't. I am," said Carew. "Pick up yore lil brother and run home." The big voice had dropped now, to a quiet, even level. There was silence. Susan Carew pushed her way through the Crippled Elk riders, her graceful hands fluttering.

Jake Bull muttered, but he picked up Hardie, who was beginning to splutter to consciousness. Pascoe turned and sullenly brought horses. One of the others went to collect the guns from the cloakroom within.

Hardie Bull said thickly, "I'll kill him. I'll take him apart. . . ."

"Come on, bud," Jake said. "Come on, we got to go, now."

"Don't got to do nothin'," said Hardie, coming wider awake. "Lick the hull caboodle of 'em. I'll kill that Rio Kid. . . ."

"T'ain't the Rio Kid, Tom says," Jake soothed, as though talking to a child. "We goin' home, bud. Come on, now. . . ."

The Razor riders grouped, mounted, got Hardie on a fine bay. Sam Stewart marvelled at the gentleness and patience of the elder brother with the younger. There was a last moment's hesitation, then the Razor gang was going away in a cloud of dust which rose across spreading moonlight.

Tom Carew said pleasantly, "Come in an' wash up, Stewart. Want ye t' meet the folks. . . ."

Sam's face was bruised. One eye was swelling a little. He looked in the wash room mirror and the wavy outline of his reflection was not "purty", at least. He frowned at the grass stains on his white shirt, but we went with firm steps into the partying crowd.

He bowed over the hands of matrons, smiled at girls. He shook hands with many men, who regarded him curiously, and at last he came to Swenson of Crippled Creek. The big Swede muttered, "See you outside, Stewart."

Then Swenson had Susan's arm and the fiddler was tuning up "Come To The Fair." They began the dance, and the girl's eyes flashed a question at Sam Stewart.

He stepped forward promptly. He said to Swenson, "'Scuse me, but this is my dance with Miss Carew."

The long face lengthened. The blond brows drew together. Swenson said, "I do not wish to be disturbed, Stewart." There was just a trace of accent beneath the western overtones of his speech, but he enunciated clearly, although he flatted his vowels. He was a man who could control himself Stewart knew, his speech, his actions.

Sam said, "I'm sorry about that. You might ask the lady's pleasure."

Susan said demurely, "If you don't mind, Oley. The gentleman promised me, you see. And he has been hurt—don't you think he deserves a reward?"

Swenson said heavily, "I do not like this, Susan. . . ." But the girl was past him, in Sam's arms.

She was light as tumbleweed in the wind. She was incredibly skilful in the dance, and her face, turned up toward him, was bright with gaiety—and curiosity. Sam said, "I'm afraid I can't whistle. One of the Razor crowd split my lips."

"You wear your scars bravely," she said. "I was watching, you know. I sneaked into the cloakroom and saw through that window."

"It was unfortunate," he said stiffly. "I apologize for fighting at your party."

"You can fight," she said frankly. "Hardie is supposed to be the best in Sunrise. Of course the Razor crowd can beat anyone—everyone together. They're

tough. That's why Swenson brought in Denver and sent for the Rio Kid."

Sam said, "Can't we talk of something else?" She could dance like an angel and talk a streak at the same time. His own dancing was a matter of pride with him, in that dancing country, but she was far and away too good for him.

She said, as though he had not spoken, "Oley is brave and smart. In a war, he knows he may be beaten. So he is trying to buy the best water holes. The Bulls wouldn't buy—they just run off any nester who tries to file homestead where their cattle graze. But Oley buys, cheap. Denver is the fastest gun and Jake Bull doesn't want to fight, either. But Hardie is all fire. . . Which one of them should I marry, Mr. Stewart?"

She had, he knew, counted on startling him. But he was already aware of her wiles. He said with great courtesy, "Really, Miss Carew, I scarcely know the boys. . . But Hardie is a good boxer. If you care for the sport. . . He'd be your man!"

She laughed. It was like a thrilling brook in the mountains, a sound thrilling to his ears. She said, "Fair enough, my friend! . . . 'I am sure you will be my friend. . .'"

The music ended. Sam said, bowing, "Never your friend, Miss Carew." He bent over her hand, straightened and stared into her eyes. He was gratified to see the flush mount to her cheeks. The mask of gaiety fell away in that instant and to his amazement he saw uncertainty and something akin to fear written there.

Then she was smiling and turning to a townsman who solicited her attention with lemonade. Sam abruptly swung on his heels and went outdoors to his meeting with Oley Swenson.

The Swede was beside the whiskey barrel, but he moved into the shadows and Sam joined him there. Swenson said harshly, "I do not like you paying attention to Miss Carew, Stewart—or whatever name you are using."

Sam said, "Stewart is right. I was born with it."

"Stewart—Rio Kid—what I care?" Swede shrugged. "Where is Harry?"

Sam said, "Harry? Never heard of him. What do you want of me, Swenson? Name it and get it over—because I aim to go back and pay some more attention t' Miss Carew."

Swenson said, "Aha! Then the fat sheriff is right? You are not Rio Kid. Okay. Stay out of my way, Stewart. You are in a bad spot. Razor will get you—or my boys will. Better leave town, Stewart." The blond brows pulled together over his long nose.

Sam said, "You know, Swenson, when I look at you it ain't so hard to be called 'purty' once in awhile by some joker. You sure are the ugliest man I've seen in many a moon." He laughed and turned his back upon the owner of Crippled Elk and strode inside the schoolhouse. . . .

Sheriff Tom Carew moved among the trees, rubbing his third chin. He murmured, "H'mmm. That feller. Got 'em both mad at him in one night. Now I wonder if I kin manage?"

CHAPTER TWO

Drygulch Bait

THE VERANDAH of the Prairie Dog Hotel was deserted save for one stout figure rocking in a large chair at the far end. Stained from his ride, Sam Stewart would have gone on to his room, but the sheriff called him and motioned to a chair at his side. The length of Main Street extended eastward in plain view and Carew's gaze went up and down. It was afternoon and warm, but not too hot. Sam removed his hat and wiped sweat from his brow, enjoying the breeze.

Carew said, "Been gone a week, haven't yuh, son? Yer bruises are mended."

Sam said, "Took a pasear around the countryside."

"Aimin' t' stay?" The Sheriff's blue eyes squinted at Sam, then went back to surveying the town. There was no one around and very little to see except the drays hauling goods and hay and grain to the merchandising establishments owned by Carew and his competitors.

"Maybeso," said Sam. His boots were dusty. He wore the faded range clothing in which he arrived.

Carew said, "Been ridin' around Razor, I expect?"

"Maybeso," said Sam steadily.

"Uh-huh!" The Sheriff nodded. He said, "Took it might graceful, the way the Razor crowd mishandled yuh. . . ."

"They'd of finished me if it wasn't for

you," Sam acknowledged with a grin. "H'mmmm. Mebbe. . . . Well, Stewart, you see in yore travels the way it's goin'?" The way a range war is shapin' up?"

Sam shrugged. "Swenson's bought a lot of land. Razor is inclined t' be careless whether its cattle grazes on Swenson's property. There's one big water hole snuggled up under a high bluff . . . it's important who owns that."

The Sheriff watched a short, bow-legged man leave the general store and walk across to the Prairie Dog Saloon. The man walked with a mincing stride, taking very short steps, rocking a bit on high heels designed to make him appear taller. He wore two guns, tied low on his flanks. Carew said, "There goes Denver Post. . . . Thet water hole is called Buffalo Well. . . . You are dead right 'bout it. Stewart, you take a range war, it's plumb bad for people. Bad for business. Bad for everything. I'm jest an ole, fat Sheriff an' I sure hate to see it start. Razor an' Crippled Elk git to fightin'—it'll 'bout ruin Sunrise. Nobody ever won a war, Stewart. Everybody suffers."

"Specially businessmen," nodded Sam, grinning. "That Buffalo Well is now bein' used by both outfits—at different times. By agreement, I suppose. If someone moved in on it. . . ."

"Denver Post filed a claim this mawnin' on a homestead which includes thet water hole," said Carew quietly. "Registered it with me. Denver is a hiyu gun. Swenson'll lend him enough men t' hold his property."

Sam rested his back in the rocker. He was somewhat weary from his week-long ride. He had moved under cover, making dry camps, trying to keep out of sight of the Bull brothers or Swenson's outfit to avoid trouble. He had studied the terrain of the Sunrise country very carefully in that week.

He said, "That'll start it. The Bulls won't stand for that."

"Nope," said the Sheriff. "Y' know, I been awful busy in Sunrise. I put my hull life into this town. Mainly for one reason—there hasn't been many western towns fit fer women and children. Sunrise is. We have shindigs, socials, churches, good feller-ship. I try to keep it thataway. But I'm gettin' too fat t' ride—and too old. Stewart, two big outfits like Razor and Crippled Creek fightin' a war will plumb wreck Sunrise."

"What are you tryin' to tell me, Sheriff?"

Come out with it," said Sam restlessly. "I'm just a stranger ridin' through. . . ."

"The Bulls were stronger at first," said Carew, as if Sam had not spoken. The afternoon was waning and several spots of dust appeared on the road to the west, Sam saw in the setting sun's slanted rays. Denver Post poked his ugly head between the swinging doors of the saloon, stared at the approaching figures, went back inside.

The Sheriff went on, "Then Swenson sent for Post, who brought in Jug, Riley, Pinky, all gunmen. The hell of it is—there's plenty land out yonder, good, green land, if they wouldn't fight. . . . Now they tell me Swenson sent Harry Dupree fer the Rio Kid. Harry ain't come back and that Rio Kid—why he is the orneriest, hottest, fastest gun-slinger in West Texas, people say. Sheriff-fighter, rustler—what-all that boy ain't done ain't in the book, I have heard tell. 'T ain't right fer Oley to bring in men like o' thet, to our peaceful country."

Sam said drily, "I take it the Bulls are your strongest supporters?"

The round, pink face turned to him, the blue eyes were sad. "Now, Stewart, that ain't kindly."

"I was just trying to bring you to the point," said Sam.

Carew sighed. He squinted westward at the rapidly approaching dust clouds. "Riders comin' in. To back Post's play? Or is it the Bulls? Trouble either way fer an old man. . . ."

Sam stood up. He said, "Poppy-cock. Don't try to hoorah me, Sheriff. I saw that big gun and I saw the way you handled it. You've got a lot of chestnuts in the fire of Sunrise. Pull them out yourself." He smiled in great good nature, bowed and went into the hotel. He needed the warm water in the big pitcher and a change of clothing.

On the upper landing he deliberately began to whistle "Come To The Fair." He was at the door to his room before she appeared. He waved to her and said, "I'm too dirty to talk to you."

She tossed her head in the way he had already come to know. "I am not so sure I wish to talk with you. A whole week! Where have you been?"

"Riding," he said. "Could we eat together?"

"I am very sorry," she said with vast dignity, "but Hardie Bull is squiring me

tonight. I'm afraid this is his night."

"Well, I'll be seein' you," said Sam. "Some day."

"Some day? You mean—you're leaving Sunrise?" Her eyes became very round and large.

"Sunrise ain't goin' to be healthy," said Sam gravely. "I'm in search of a quiet place t' settle down—with a nice, homebody gal."

She flounced away, toward her apartment in the rear. "Then you'd better be going on. There is nothing here for you, I am sure!"

He chuckled, entering his room. He took off his stained clothing and reached for his bedroll.

In an instant he knew it had been searched. He took everything he owned and placed it upon the big, clean bed. He found nothing missing.

HE WASHED from head to foot and dressed in laundered white shirt and black accessories again. He was thinking about the set-up between Razor and Crippled Creek and wondering how Swenson could hope to win.

To his mind the homesteading of Buffalo Well was a stupid trick, inviting a war which could have only one ending. For the Bull brothers were local, their hard-riding hands were local talent. No crew of hired gun-fighters could prevail against public sentiment and home-grown boys. It simply was not in the cards, unless . . .

Unless Swenson meant to have the Bull brothers killed off in the initial engagement. Unless Denver Post and the other gunmen were to bait a trap at Buffalo Well and set their sights on the Bulls alone.

It was none of his affair, he told himself angrily. The Bulls had attacked him, unfairly beaten him. If Swenson bushwhacked them, outsmarted them, killed them, it was good riddance to bad rubbish.

He buckled the cartridge belt around his hips, let the gun nestle on his thigh. And in his rear, special pocket the derringer nestled again. Sunrise was loaded for trouble—and Sam Stewart figured to be ready.

He went across the street to the saloon. Pausing in the doorway, he saw Denver Post at the far end of the bar, with the three riders, Jug, Riley and Pinky grouped

around him. Midway of the bar were Pascoe, Monte and Miguel, from Razor. The bartender looked pale and worried.

Denver Post had a wolfish face, with yellowing teeth which snarled beneath a black mustache. He was saying, "Yep. Filed on the water hole. Aim t' raise a crop of alfalfa t' hold the title. Aim t' feed an' water my cattle an' git rich—like other folks. And any sons come 'round stickin' their noses into my business—I aim t' ventilate 'em 'til they run blood like a sieve."

Pascoe drained his whiskey with a sudden motion. Outnumbered, the Razor crowd was in no position to fight. Neither of the Bulls were present. Pascoe motioned toward the door and the three Razor cowboys filed out. Denver Post laughed raucously and called after them, "See yuh at Buffalo Well, yuh yokels!"

Sam said to the barkeep, "I'll take a celery water."

Post called down, "Have a drink on me, Stewart. Wish ye'd kilt Hardie t' other night. Wish Swenson'd let me in on the fight."

"Thanks," said Sam. "I don't drink."

"I'll buy sass or anythin' fer a man kin lick a Bull," swaggered Post. "I aim to whup the two of 'em, an' good. Me an' Oley . . ."

The doors swung and Swenson came in. He nodded briefly at Sam and jerked a thumb at the exit. Post lowered his head for a moment like a truculent animal, then shrugged and led the way outdoors. The gunmen walked with several feet between them, never bunching up. They were a hard crew, Sam thought.

Swenson said, "Stewart, I thought you had left Sunrise."

Sam sipped his cool drink. He wanted to wait until Hardie Bull and the girl had left the dining room before he ate dinner. He said mildly, "You got a right to your opinions."

Swenson stepped close. He said, "You misunderstand me, Stewart. Hardie Bull has bragged he will gun you on sight. Maybe you should leave, eh?" The man's hard eyes pried at Sam.

"When I get ready."

Swenson said, "My boys, they would help . . . but no, you are not that kind. You are perhaps very tough, Stewart. I do not understand what happens to my man, Dupree. Nor where is the Rio Kid. But I

warn you, Stewart, do not play games with me. I am not now in the mood for games, you see?"

Sam said, "I never play games, Swenson. With me it is always for keeps. You think you can hold that water hole?"

"That is my business—and Denver's," said Swenson flatly. "You do not line up with either side, eh? But you talk, talk."

"Well, I can quit talkin'," Sam smiled. He put down the glass, shoved Swenson aside as though he were an inanimate obstruction and walked out of the saloon. The Swede's eyes were like agates, following him, but he paid no heed. He had evaluated Swenson to his own satisfaction. He went into the hotel dining room.

As he had feared, Susan Carew and Hardie Bull were lingering over apple pie and coffee.

Hardie's eyes grew blacker, following Sam's progress to a table across the room. His chair scraped on the floor and Susan said something sharp in a low voice.

Sam sat down without looking at the pair. He ordered from the waiter and fixed his eyes on the far wall, his mind going over the situation at Buffalo Well. He had been particularly interested in that part of the country, recognizing it at once as the key to power. Outdoors Denver Post's voice ordered his men to saddle and a moment later Crippled Creek's outfit had gone in a clatter of hoofs. Oley Swenson peered through the door, but withdrew his horsey head quickly when he saw the three occupants of the room.

Sam's steak came and he ate slowly, enjoying his first hot meal in a week. He became aware that across the dining room the girl was arguing with Hardie Bull. He heard Bull's chair scrape again and regretfully eyed the apple pie and slab of cheese which he knew now he would not get to eat.

He swivelled his chair on one hind leg and came around, facing the black-haired man squarely, with his gun in plain sight. Hardie Bull's mouth was savage.

"I warned yuh, Stewart. Now I hear you been annoyin' Miss Susan. . . ."

Sam cocked an eye past Bull. The girl was coming to her feet, her cheeks pale. Sam said, "She doesn't enjoy my whistlin'?"

"Yuh kin step outside now, or take it

later," Hardie hammered at him. "You're totin' a gun—we'll see if yuh kin use it."

"You tried it with fists and lost," Sam reminded him. "I don't want to kill you, Bull. Why don't you stick to your courtin'? Oley Swenson's around, and if you get hurt, he'll take over your night with the gal!"

Bull seemed to swell in size. His anger disrupted his aplomb completely. He roared, "Yuh insolent dog. . . ." His hand went to his gun.

Sam dropped off the chair onto one knee. He slid the Colt from its holster with speed which was the more amazing since he did not seem to hasten. He held it pointed at Hardie Bull and said, "Don't draw, sucker. You're slower'n molasses in February. . . ."

The girl cried, "Hardie! No!"

There was an open window behind Sam, and he knew it. He moved, crab-fashion, without arising from one knee, to get out of range of that square of danger. Bull followed him with his eyes, the red blood coursing through the veins in his neck until they stood out like ropes.

Bull choked, "Yuh damn slicker, there's somethin' plenty wrong about you. I'll see you . . ."

The report was almost in Sam's ear. It was very loud and the odor of powder mingled with the food odors, stinking and pungent. Hardie Bull's arms flung upward, as though in protest against this indignity. The left breast of his shirt spread slowly with crimson.

Sam spun on his knee and the Colt spoke. He threw two fast shots at the window, then plunged to get closer. There was no sight of anyone in the alley. As he recklessly showed himself, another shot bit into the sill, forcing him back. He leaped to his feet and began running toward the back of the restaurant, knocking chairs aside.

In the door to the kitchen stood a stout form. The big Peacemaker was steady in Sheriff Carew's hand. He said, "I'll jest take yer gun, Stewart."

THE GIRL was against the wall, her hand to her cheek, her eyes wild. She said, "Sam didn't do it. He had Hardie covered. Someone shot Hardie through the window, I tell you."

The Sheriff considered. Hardie Bull lay quiet on the floor. There was no use to send for a doctor. The younger Bull brother was dead.

Carew said slowly, "Jake'll never b'lieve it. Pascoe and the boys are nursin' a hate, stirred up by Swenson. Sam ye'll have to git outa town. They'll shoot yuh afore we can do anythin'."

Sam said, "Return my gun and I'll chance that."

"No! I'll hide him upstairs. Then we can get him out of town," Susan said. "Hardie was murdered, I saw it. . . . It was awful. . . ."

"I won't run," said Sam. His lips were a straight, thin line across his handsome face.

Carew said, "Yuh'll do what I say, Stewart." He motioned with the big revolver. "Git on upstairs, afore folks come. Give me your parole, you won't run from Susan."

"I just said I wouldn't run." Sam's voice was steady, cool.

"Upstairs," said Carew, in the voice he had used at the schoolhouse the night of the fight. Sam's eyes went to the prone, useless thing which had been Hardie Bull.

The girl said, "Come on, Sam. Please, for me . . . I know you're innocent, but father's right. They are all on the prod—all the Razor crowd. They'll try to lynch you. . . ."

Sam said under his breath, "The poor devil—at least he was a fighter. You can never hate a man who fights you and keeps tryin'. . . . All right. I'll play it your way, Sheriff." He gave the stout lawman a long glance. Then he went quickly and silently after the girl.

At the top of the stairs she withdrew one hand from her voluminous skirts. She handed him his revolver. She said, "Father trusts you. Here, take this—and stay with me until he comes."

The apartment had been made by combining three of the hotel's large rooms.

It was very comfortable and well furnished. There were mirrors, silken cushions, a whatnot covered with china figurines, all the appurtenances of a home run by a woman. Sam paced up and down, thumbing cartridges into his gun, scarcely noticing his surroundings.

The girl came from her bedroom, a damp rag held against her brow. Her hair was slightly disarranged. She had no flirtatious mannerisms, now. She walked swiftly to the door, listened while she held it open.

Pascoe's voice came, "Don't try t' lie him outa it. Y' know we'll hang the son. Git out boys, an' look fer thet Stewart!"

Sam said, "Could you get a glimpse of who shot Hardie through that window?"

"No," she said. "I just saw a bony hand. . . . Bony! My God, Sam! . . . It was a big hand, and the knuckles were covered with blond hair. Do you know who it was, Sam?"

"Oley Swenson," said Sam. "He is a very smart hombre. He saw us in the same room, figgered mebbe there would be a ruckus. He planted himself outside and made sure Bull would be killed."

"But we can't prove it," she mourned. "I only saw the hand. It isn't enough. Oh, Sam, you'll do what father says, won't you?" She came close to him, seizing him by the arms, looking into his eyes. "Hardie was being very unpleasant about you and I told him I wished I'd accepted your offer of dinner. . . . I feel guilty, Sam. That's what made him so angry. . . ."

Sam said, "That's all right, Susan. He'd have found an excuse to jump me. . . . Yes, I'll do what your father says. I have no desire to be lynched."

"Father would die defending you," she said. "It would be horrible, Sam. We'll get you out of Sunrise. . . ."

"You think I'll leave the country with murder hanging over me?" Sam shook his head. "I'll hide—but I'll take care of this thing, myself."

"You are very sure of yourself," she said. She stepped away from him. "Where do you come from, Sam Stewart? Who are you?"

He smiled at her, but there was frost in his eyes. "Girls out here don't ask those questions—except of their suitors."

She snapped back, "You said you would never be—a friend!"

He nodded. "Listen! Is that your father?" His gun was out, pointing at the door.

She said, "Yes." She opened the door. She drew back as her father squeezed in, and stepped against the wall, closing the door tight.

"They're a-raisin' hell," wheezed the sheriff. "But I got the boy out back puttin' food in a sack. Yer hoss is saddled. Susan'll git yuh down the stairs. Yuh know the butte smack up agin Buffalo Well, Sam?"

"I didn't go up there," Sam said.

"Yuh know how to git there, though?" persisted the sheriff. His blue eyes were snapping and his voice cold and direct. Sam nodded. "Don't leave no trail. I'll form a posse. Jake'll form his own bunch. You lose Jake, nemmine about my crew. There is a sod hut on the butte. Hole up there until yuh hear from me or Susan. Will yuh do it?"

Sam said, "I think I catch on, Sheriff."

"Yuh better ketch quick," grunted Carew. "Yuh wouldn't look good stretchin' a rope. Come to think of it, I never yet see a man really graced a rope hung over a limb." He nodded at Susan reassuringly and eased out the door.

The girl said, "The back way, Sam. Hurry."

Sam slid into the hall behind the girl. They went down the stairs and into the yard. It was early night and the moon was not yet up. A colored boy with rolling eyes held the nose of the black Morgan Sam had ridden into Sunrise. His roll was behind the saddle, and atop it the provisions. His rifle was in the boot. Carew had been quick and thorough in his preparations.

The girl said, "Be careful, Sam . . . Oh, be careful. This is a terrible time. I hated to see it come, but it was inevitable."

Sam said, "I won't say I don't know what you mean, 'cause I do."

"However much you guess, you don't know it all," she said with a flash of her former spirit. "Will you wait up there until one of us comes?"

Sam said, "I'll be there—or thereabouts." He put his foot in a stirrup and stared at her. "I hope it will be you. I hope you come."

"Oh," she said. She backed away, holding her hands together waist high, her head tilted. "You can't mean that. You think I am a flirt. You think I . . ."

"*Hasta luego*," he said. "I hear the wolves." In front of the hotel there was a sudden accession of noise. The black wheeled on its hind legs, and the soft ground gave up no pounding as the swift, strong animal headed out of Sunrise. The girl stood, her position unchanged, her hands writhing together. He had been very handsome in the faint gleam of the boy's lantern, looking down at her with solemn, demanding eyes. . . .

HIS WEEK'S ride stood him in good stead now. He was without rest, but he had the wiry strength of the plainsman to keep him going. The black ate up space over the uneven ground Sam was forced to take, describing a shallow semi-circle which evaded the road and led to the hills.

Sam made no effort to cover his tracks. Speed was the essential thing for the time being. He gave the horse a blow halfway through the night—and midway to the foothills. He got down and put his ear to earth and heard the far-off hammering of hoofbeats. He tightened the cinch and again they pointed for the hills. It was uphill going for awhile. The black panted. Below, following a blind trail, but foreseeing that a fugitive would head for the hill country, the Razor crowd came piling. Once a rider appeared briefly on the horizon, just when the moon rose. It was one of Razor's range riders, however, and his curiosity did not include taking a shot at an unknown rider.

Sam came behind Buffalo Well as the first of the posse clattered on the shale below. There would be no tracks for the pursuers from then on, and he knew they would camp until morning.

When he hit the trail he knew must lead to Buffalo Butte, he dismounted. He smiled grimly, plodding up the rocky path. Sheriff Carew was one of the most astute men he had ever met. He was also a great opportunist, Sam added, with a mind quick as a steel trap.

The level top of the butte was a welcome sight. The moon spread a glow across the grassy mesa and a fringe of trees afforded natural protection from view of those below. It was ideal for a camp so long as no fires showed, and there was water from the head-spring which bubbled above the Well. The sod hut was furnished with a bunk needing only some cedar boughs and Sam's blanket for covering.

There was even an axe in the provision sack. There were canned goods, hardtack—and a box of ammunition to fit both the .45 Colt revolver and the .44 Winchester rifle. Sam chuckled again. Sheriff Carew had not made up this hundle on the spur of the moment. There was no question about it. Carew had planned for Sam to make a dry camp for a few days—and Sam would have bet a million that it was this very site which Carew had picked for the scene of this trip. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Gunpowder Hoedown

BLACKIE grazed on the clump grass, Sam loafed beneath the oak tree which spread a convenient branch over the edge of Buffalo Butte. It was the second day, and the wagons were creaking across the level plain. Sam had spotted them an hour earlier.

His position could not have been better, he ruminated. The rifle lay in the crook of his arm. Anyone approaching from the rear would be forced to toil noisily and in full view up the rocky trail. Eastward, below him, a hundred feet of sheer cliff fell away to Buffalo Well which lay clear and cool in the shadow below. And now the wagons came, from Swenson's Crippled Elk Ranch.

There were riders. Sam easily picked out Denver Post, a tiny figure on a dun cayuse. Jug, Riley and Pink were also mounted. The wagons were manned by teamsters and were filled with lumber.

Sam climbed the tree and curled up on the big, flat limb. He roosted there and in two hours the sound of hammers made a peaceful tattoo on the clear air. Denver Post and the other riders lay in the shade and watched while toiling carpenters erected the skeleton of a small, one-room shack, but good enough to pass for a homesteader's mansion.

There were other things—food, furniture, boxes of cartridges which were piled within the house. Then the last wagon drew up and was unloaded. It was piled with bags of sand. Post arose and directed the storing of these bags, within the house, around the three walls which were vulnerable to attack. By nightfall a small fortress had been erected, with water at its door.

Oley Swenson, thought Sam, was a man of forethought. He had planned his war. He had expected to wait for Dupree and the Rio Kid, but their failure to appear had not deterred him. He was determined to give battle to the Razor Ranch—and here he had decided it would be joined. He had managed to pick his own site, and to fortify it.

There was no choice for Razor but to fight, Sam knew. There were other water holes, but this alone was perpetually fed by the spring which began in the rocks near where Sam watched. This was the largest,

and the key to the water situation in the Sunrise country. The common agreement to share it was the only sensible way to decide its disposal. When Swenson sent his man in to homestead Buffalo Well, he asked for war.

Now Hardie Bull was dead, the odds had lengthened. Oley had been very smart there, too, seizing the opportunity to kill Hardie and throw the blame elsewhere. While Jake hunted for Sam Stewart, Swenson got his little fort erected. Very clever, indeed, Sam admitted.

* * *

Although Sheriff Tom Carew could not ride hard, nor meet young men in physical combat, he could think. His was the biggest stake in the town, his the responsibility for the peace of the county. He had taken his own steps to prevent disintegration of all for which he had worked. And, of course, he had picked Sam Stewart to be his legs, his eyes—and perhaps his executioner. Why he had done so was another matter, and Sam's eyes went hard, waiting for nightfall, wondering.

He cut open a can of beans with the axe and ate them cold, sopping the hardtack in the catsup. He drank from the stream and wished the cold water was hot coffee, for a change. He went restlessly back to the edge of the cliff and saw the fire below. Denver Post had a bottle, but the Crippled Elk crowd was drinking sparingly, and always there was one of them out of the camp, riding patrol. Two swarthy, sullen-appearing Mexicans had come in since nightfall, Sam saw. Now there were six "homesteaders" to defend the water hole.

Nothing happened that night. It took another day, as Sam had known it would, for Razor to get organized. The first Razor rider appeared in the morning, coming straight into the camp, not knowing what had happened. He backed out at sight of Denver Post, spurred his horse and rode like wildfire as shots from rifles kicked up dust about his horse's feet. Post laughed and waved and immediately began cleaning his guns.

Nobody ever looked upward, which seemed strange. Then it occurred to Sam that this was the time when Buffalo Butte would be considered. The two Mexicans slept all day, but at dusk Denver Post called them and gave them careful instructions, and now everyone was staring up,

until Sam felt stark naked in his tree.

He backed down cautiously, but in great haste. He caught up Blackie and hobbled and tethered him to a tree where he would be out of sight. Then he went to the trail and waited behind a boulder.

The Mexicans made quite a lot of noise. They called back and forth to each other in Spanish, cursing the steepness of the trail, but cheerful in that they could shoot without fear of being exposed to the first of the enemy all knew would come. The taller of the two was quicker and arrived at the boulder several steps ahead of the other.

It was necessary for Sam to step into sight. His revolver barrel lifted, dropped. The quicker vaquero hit the ground and grunted once, then lay still. The other made no sign, standing with hands shoulder high, mouth open.

Sam said in Spanish, "Come here, amigo. Take this rope and tie your brother. Tie him very thoroughly, for I shall inspect the knots and I have another rope with which to beat you severely if you fail."

The Mexican stumbled forward, but performed his task well. Sam motioned him to drag his fellow to the top of the mesa. Then he shoved the second vaquero on his face and used the rest of his rope to hog-tie him. He tore the shirt of the unconscious one and fashioned gags. He was quite pleased with his job of caring for these hired killers. He stacked them under a bush, where he could watch them from time to time.

He climbed out on his limb and looked down. There was no fire, now. Vague forms were about the shack and the door stood wide, so that the defenders could make a fast entry. Denver Post suddenly arose and went to the north of the camp.

There was no mistaking the tall rider by light of the moon. It was Oley Swenson. He had not been able to withstand temptation to be in at the end. He talked with Post for several moments, then turned his horse and rode back toward the north. But he would not be far, Sam knew. He would be lurking behind some rock, gun in hand, looking for a safe target.

There was sound on the rock again. Sam clambered down, crouched, rifle in hand. There was a low whistle. It was the tune, "Come To The Fair."

He lowered the rifle and ran to the edge of the trail. The girl was leading a small bay pony. She wore a buckskin jacket and a short skirt, with Indian leggings. She looked like a small boy, but when he took her arm she did not feel like a boy.

"Sam!" she said. "Oh, you're all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. "Fine night for murder."

"Father's with Jake Bull," she said rapidly. "He's trying to keep Jake from making a headlong attack. Jake is crazy with grief and rage."

"Yeah, he would be," nodded Sam. "He thought a heap of Hardie."

"Father sent you this," she said. From the back of the bay she lifted a huge coil of rope. "He said you'd know what to do."

Sam said, "H'mmm. Your pappy has the strangest ideas about me."

She walked across the mesa. She peered over the edge, started back. She said, "You—you're not going down there! It's dangerous!"

"It sure is," said Sam. "Suicide's more like it."

"Father said he can't hold Jake for long. He said it would mean Jake would be killed



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER
★

for sure. Oley has been smarter than Jake." The girl shook her head sharply. "I shouldn't tell you this . . . but father said to. . . ."

"Yeah, I know," said Sam. "If they lock horns here, Razor is due to be wiped out. Swenson ain't the kind of man the sheriff could get along with."

She said passionately, "Oley Swenson is a beast. I had to—oh, you might as well know . . . I had to flirt with him, find out what I could. We all knew Oley was wicked. But we played like he was just another cowman, and had rights like other folks, because father thought we might avoid trouble. But now he's gone this far—what can we do? Denver Post and those others—they're killers. If he had brought in the Rio Kid too, I don't know what we could have done."

"You don't know what can be done now," Sam pointed out. He glanced at the two Mexicans. He sighed. He looked at the moon. There was a heavy cloud bank moving across the sky. In a little while the moon would be obscured.

He said, "I could ride down the back way—but it would take all night to sashay up on 'em, and they're patrollin'. An' Swenson's out there. They're lookin' for Razor to come for them."

"You can't do down there. I don't care if Jake Bull is killed. . . . Oh, yes I do, too. I know Jake is hard, but he's honest and decent. . . . He just babied Hardie too much, that's all. Jake is good, Sam."

Sam took hold of the light, strong rope. He went to the oak tree and made a good bight, tying his knots with care. He said slowly, "There are a couple of bad Mexes over yonder. You'll have to watch 'em. I won't need the rifle. . . . Wish I had another revolver."

She said, "Oh dear, father sent you one. But you can't go down . . ."

He shook his head, marvelling again at the foresight of the fat sheriff. The gun was almost a duplicate of his own. He loaded it, stuffed more shells into his belt. The clouds caught a wind current and moved a little faster. Sam said, "We got about a half hour."

"What—what do you mean?" she faltered.

Her eyes were luminous in the silvery light. He tucked her small frame into the

crook of one arm and led her under the spreading oak, out of sight of the Mexicans for a moment. He said, "I don't aim to go down there and start pawing at your pappy's hot chestnuts without something to go on."

Her soft, warm body relaxed. She whispered, "Sam, from the moment I saw you. . . . Honest, Sam . . . I'm not really a flirt. . . ."

Her lips were very warm.

IT WAS pitch dark. Below the riders were calling to each other, using the coyote yap as a signal. There were two of them riding, plus Swenson, lurking in the background. That left Denver Post and one other in camp.

The rope dangled like a long snake. He wore gauntlets to protect his hands. The breeze stirred the rope as though it were alive. Carew had sent plenty. It dropped straight to the water hole.

He could not tell himself why he was doing it. And he didn't try, now. He only knew that fat sheriff had depended on him so doing. He let himself down, hand over hand, his soft boot toes touching the sheer side of the wall.

The breeze prevailed, and he kept throwing glances at the cloud bank. He shuddered to think what would happen if the wind dissolved it. He would be a beautiful target for those below. He could picture Swenson's hard, happy face leaning on a rifle stock as he aimed a bullet at Sam's helpless body.

He thought of the Swede as he went down, ever coming closer to the sheen of Buffalo Well. It was hard to believe that Swenson could be so cold-bloodedly avaricious as to murder men to gain material advantage.

Yet there were men like Swenson, many of them, in this turbulent frontier country. And there were men like Tom Carew, who knew how to make money and who gave back to the community of what they gained. If there was a cause to die for, Sam reckoned this one was good enough—just so he had his chance to fight before he died.

The wind stiffened and he swayed on the slender rope. Enough of this would scrape the soft strands across rock and he would drop. He began going down faster. He had no idea how far he had proceeded.

He fought for calmness. He was alone, without protection other than the guns he could not use from where he dangled. There was one moment when he felt it all, felt helpless. Then he was going even faster for the bottom of the cliff and one foot touched water.

He was prepared for this and let the wind hit him. He swung, aiding the breeze. The rope made the pendulum sweep and his extended toe hit earth.

He let go the rope, dropping to the ground, his arms stiff with strain. He took off the gauntlets, working his fingers to restore circulation. He was directly behind the little frame house.

He gathered himself there, every sense alert. Denver Post's voice was saying something to Jug, his companion. Sam had slipped the borrowed revolver into his hip pocket, where he usually carried the deringer.

The wind had its way. The clouds reluctantly soared from the face of the moon. Jug said to Denver, "Jest right fer night-shootin'. Reckon they'll come in fast fer a quick kill?"

"It don't make no nevermind," said Post. "These here sawed-off scatterguns'll take keer of anyone who tries to come in."

"Oley sure thinks of eve'ything," Jug said admiringly. "He's a bueno boss."

"Kilt Hardie hisself," said Denver grudgingly. "He improved hisself considerable with me when he done thet."

Sam listened hard for a sound beyond and above the voices of the two contented gun-hands. At least he heard the coyote call and the answer. The riders were far from the camp, going their rounds.

He slid around the wall of the house and worked his way forward, ducking below window level. He came to the front and gingerly poked his bare head around the edge.

Post and Jug were squatted on their heels, just outside the door of the cabin. He could have shot them both like popping over sitting rabbits. Indeed for one moment he debated, knowing them for killers, hired dry-gulchers. But he sighed, unable to carry out the deed.

He said softly, "All right, Denver. Make your play."

Like a spider, the small man spun. Amazed, his confusion did not for a sec-

ond hamper his action. He was all animal, trained to defense. Jug lost a moment staring, disbelieving, but Denver went for both his guns.

Sam, in plain view, made his draw. His shots spanged across the few feet of space and Denver Post spun, screaming to the moonlit sky, baying for his men to come to a rescue.

Jug got his gun out. But Sam fired again and Jug went around in a circle, then curled up and died on the ground.

The riders were thundering in. Sam leaped over the body of Denver Post and across the sill of the door. He did not close the portal, but leaned there, waiting, his eyes squinted against the deceptive light beyond the clearing near the water.

He heard Swenson's stentorian tones, "Don't go in there yet! It is that devil, that stranger. Come in slow. He's got the shot-guns."

The short, ugly weapons leaned against the wall. Sam glanced at the guns, shrugged. Nobody would come close enough for him to use them. Swenson would see to that. A rifle bullet thudded into the door lintel and he moved inside.

Now he was besieged, by the man who had built the fort. And he had no legal right upon the property, he was aware, and no legal right to be in the land. If Swenson killed him, there was little anyone could do about it. Swenson would be very bold under the circumstances. The men would be raging at the death of their leader and Jug.

But Razor would be coming up. Swenson was pushed by that fact. Sam watched the windows. Bullets kept ripping through. The sand bags caught all the low shots, the high ones riddled the walls. Sam was safe enough, he thought—for a time. When Jake Bull and his men came—Swenson from his rocky vantage might get Bull.

This last thought struck Sam hard. Jake was the leader of the cattle industry, next to Swenson. With Hardie Bull dead, the countryside needed the elder brother. If Swenson could hold Sam down until Jake rushed the fort, thinking Denver Post was holed up there, certain death would result for the boss of Razor.

The shooting had become methodical, now that Swenson had his men under control. They concentrated on the door and the

windows, just to make Sam keep his head down and stay put. There was no chance of getting out. . . .

He had watched them build this shanty. He crawled across the earthen floor to the rear, where the cabin backed up to the cliff. He wondered how Susan was making it up on Buffalo Butte. . . .

There was an axe. He hacked at the earth. A board end came to his hand. He used it as a shovel. He dug industriously, although he was no hand at labor with the hands. He swore at a blister which appeared immediately on his left hand, but was glad it had not been his right.

He finally felt the axe go through the sod. He slid back to a window and fired a few shots. The answering fusillade was satisfactory. He returned to his task, redoubling his efforts.

He broke through a space a yard wide. He threw a last couple of bullets into the night. He reloaded his guns and lowered himself face up on the floor. He wriggled his shoulders and pushed and in a moment he was free, bent double on the spot where he had abandoned the end of the rope.

There was sudden, shocking silence. Then Swenson's voice, amazingly close, shouted, "He has got out! Like I knew! Ride down, get him! Behind the cabin!"

Sam hesitated one moment. Then he wheeled and took off, diving. He hit the water, thankful for his training in Texan rivers. He went under as the tricky Crippled Elk men came in from opposite sides. He fetched as deep as he could, holding his breath.

Rifles cracked. There was a splash near Sam. He nearly burst for lack of air. He had to come up. He turned his head, letting only one eye and his nose appear on the surface.

The eye blinked. Rifles blasted on the edge of the water. A foot kicked near him. He gasped and swallowed water. He turned over, reckless of bullets and reached out.

An arm splashed feebly. He said, sputtering, "Susan!"

"Saw you . . . saw them coming in. . . ." She went under. He swam with one arm. A voice called from the cabin.

He turned about. He held her chin with his hand, very gently. She did not struggle. She managed to say, "Can't swim."

The voice bellowed again, "Git outa thet water, yuh durn fools. Yuh want to ketch yer death of cold?"

"All right, Sheriff," said Sam wearily. "We're coming."

Eager hands reached for them, hauled them dripping to the land. Sam shook himself like a shaggy dog and helped the girl to her feet. She said, "I saw him, I tell you . . . I had to come down."

"Who, him?" Sheriff Carew nodded toward a long, still form on the ground near the front door of the cabin. The bodies of Riley and Pinky lay at either side, where they had fallen from their horses. Jake Bull's lined, unhappy face was gaunt in the moonlight. Pascoe was staring down at the dead face of Oley Swenson, cursing the corpse in slow, grinding rhythm. Carew said, "Had him covered. Snuck up whilst he was closin' in on you. I'd a been here sooner, on'y I had a turrible time convincin' Jake it was Oley kilt his brother."

"How'd you know?" asked Susan. "I didn't dare tell you . . . I wasn't sure. . . ."

"Seen him take off on his hoss. Didn't have a rifle, and I knew he'd show up here. He was thet kinda feller," said Carew. "I figgered Sam would make a play, which was all we needed to git in close. 'Course I cain't ride fast, so we was some slow. My fault, Sam. . . ." He grinned happily, completely the genial politician Sam had first encountered in Sunrise.

"Yeah," said Sam. "You knew I'd come down that rope. . . . You thought. Why did you know it so good?"

"Waal, there was thet poster I held out," chuckled Carew. "Figgered you knew about it. You'd wanta square yo'self with me, seein' as I knew yuh. And I thought you was the kinda hombre who'd see a thing through. I heard good things, too, about the Rio Kid!"

"You're pretty smart, Sheriff," said Sam Stewart. "And those pictures do look like me. But you've made a mistake at last. The Rio Kid was my cousin, Randy Stewart. And he was, like you say, a good boy gone wrong. . . ."

The sheriff and the Razor men gaped. Susan said bravely, "Yes, and maybe your grandchildren'll be proud of you too, if you don't act too smart, accusin' their father of bein' a criminal!"

THE END

Night Coach to Rawhide

By Dan
Cushman



Griff saw the gun-hung stranger come toward the coach.

On that midnight stage trip, Griff Sterrett knew one of his fellow passengers had been hired to kill him. And on three little words: Who? When? Where? depended his life and the future of a rich cattle-land.

SHERIFF JUD HANEY leaned forward in his swivel chair, planking his heavy forearms on the desk, studying Griff Sterrett's leathery face. Then he spoke,

"I don't want to get you jumpy, Sterrett, but I'd better tell you that there's a man here in Carter Flats waiting to kill you."

Griff Sterrett took time to twist up a cigarette. He struck a match on a thumbnail, puffed, and looked down on the sheriff's broad face through a bluish cloud of

smoke. Sterrett was medium tall, lean with a leather toughness, about thirty. The sheriff's statement hadn't moved him to any show of surprise.

"Who is he?"

"Damn it all, man, if I knew that do you suppose I'd just sit here and do nothing?"

Sterrett smiled. "I don't know what you'd do. I'm sort of a stranger here."

"Well, I'd do somethin'," Haney said in a grumbling tone. "Damn it all, you must

know something of the chance you're taking."

"In other words you'd just as soon not have the responsibility of protecting a man who is damned fool enough to be the only witness against the Association."

"I didn't say that."

"Sorry."

"Fact is, I don't know that it's any Association gunman that's out after you—"

"But they're the ones I'll testify against in that Rawhide court, and they'd be the ones to profit if I was to stop an ounce of lead. You'll have to admit that's a bit of coincidence."

Haney grunted and took time to light the coal oil lamp.

Sterrett asked, "What would you suggest? Find myself a hole and crawl in till the coach leaves?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. You're old enough to look out for yourself. I don't think this killer, whoever he is will try to get you in the back. Not if he's working for the Association he won't. Folks are too riled up agin them already. He'll try to make it look like a quarrel. So if somebody steps on your toes, hold your temper."

Haney drew a big, silver watch from his pocket and looked at it.

"Five. The coach should leave here at two. See if you can keep yourself out of trouble for nine hours."

Griff Sterrett ground out the remainder of his cigarette. The wind was blowing outside, and in the silence he could hear it carrying little, hissing bits of dirt and sand against the windowpanes, flapping a loose piece of tarpaper on the roof. Behind the sheriff's chair a door led to his family's living quarters. The door was a few inches ajar and Griff could hear someone whistling. It occurred to him that he had not heard the tune since leaving Montana—

"They feed in the coulee

They water in the draw

Their coats are all matted

Their backs are all raw . . ."

Sheriff Haney squeaked back in his chair and said, "I hope you don't mind if I put one of my deputies to watching you."

"Help yourself," Sterrett grinned.

The sheriff opened a drawer and found a key attached to a large brass tag. He tossed it over.

"Here. You already have a room, but maybe it would be a good idea to hang

around this one until time for the coach to leave. Number twelve. Nobody 'cept the clerk and me know you have it."

Sterrett dropped the key in his pocket and went outside.

The wind caught him with a fierceness that made him turn half around, pull down his hat, and button his flapping jacket. The sky was a thick blue-gray. By early twilight the unpainted false fronts along Carter Flat's main street looked more than usually bleak and depressing.

He looked up and down the street. The only living things in sight were a half-dozen cayuse horses clustered at the hitch rack in front of the Idaho Saloon, their tails to the wind.

He walked down the platform sidewalks, leaning to keep his balance. A gasoline mantle lamp burned inside Frenchy's restaurant. Through the dirty windows he could see the counter with most of its stools filled, and the three booths in back, all empty.

Inside he took the furthest stool.

"Steak," he said without bothering to look at the grease-spotted bill-of-fare. "Rare."

Darkness was complete when he finished supper and went outside again. The wind didn't feel so cold now, with steak and coffee in his stomach. By habit he lifted his Colt, and dropped it back in its holster. The door of the Round-Up Saloon welcomed him. A couple of card games flourished. He ordered a beer . . .

"You're Griff Sterrett, aren't you?"

He jumped at the sound of his name spoken so close to his elbow. He turned and faced a broad, sloppy man with a grayish bristle of tangled whiskers. The fellow grinned, and shoved back his sweat-stained black hat.

"Carmody," he said, introducing himself. "Jack Carmody. Guess maybe you don't recollect me. Used to live over at Rocker. Had a placer claim out in the hardpan when you worked for that Proctor outfit. I was there that night you fought old man Beadie's boy. You sure gave him what he was lookin' for."

Griff Sterrett still couldn't place him, though he remembered the incident referred to. There really hadn't been much to it. Young Beadie had gone for his gun, and Griff had taken it away from him.

"Better have a drink," he said.
"Sure!"

When Carmody turned to face the bar his old blue suit coat came open, and Griff could see the gun that he carried, gambler fashion, under his left armpit.

"You're here to testify agin' the cattlemen, ain't you?" Carmody asked, filling the small whisky glass to the brim.

"The trial isn't here. They moved it to Rawhide."

It was apparent that Carmody was aware of this fact already. He lifted the little glass. His fingers were strong and stubby, the nails trimmed deep and clotted with dirt.

"A long life to you!"

The liquor slid down his throat in a single, long gulp. He made a slight face, and his eyes became watery. He said,

"I ain't the sort that likes to get his neck in another man's noose, Sterrett, but if I was you I wouldn't stand around with that light shinin' on my back."

Sterrett didn't answer. He was wondering why Carmody had his gun hidden in that shoulder holster rather than carrying it in plain sight like everybody else.

Carmody nudged a trifle closer, "You know, Sterrett, it ain't good for a man to have somethin' eatin' on him that he don't dare spill."

"I intend to tell that court everything I know."

"Lord man, it ain't *you* I was talkin' about—it was *me*." Carmody let his small eyes rove the place and went on. "I was thinkin' that maybe your words wouldn't stand up too good in that Rawhide court—all alone. Just you, one common, ordinary small rancher with all them cattle barons of the Association on the other side of the fence. But if there was somebody else that saw that nester massacre. . . . Well, you see how it would be."

"What are you getting at, Carmody?"

"It's this—you weren't the only one that had a look at that shootin' them Association killers pulled. There was one other man. *Me*."

Griff looked sharply, meeting Carmody's eyes. The man was perspiring a little, so evidently it had been a struggle getting the admission out.

Carmody said warningly, "Now don't tell nobody!"

"I won't. Where were you that you saw it?"

"Me? How'd I see the massacre? Well, when you and them other fellows were holed up in that Bar J ranch house, I was on my way, ridin' cross-country from Lucky crick. I got a little placer claim over there, and was headed for the Flats to get quicksilver. I heard the shootin' and sneaked down a dry wash for a look-see. I hid among the rimrocks and saw 'em set fire to the house, and saw you belly-crawlin' away, too, only of course I couldn't tell who it was. Pretty soon Ewing and the rest of the killers rode uphill not fifty feet from me. I remember their faces just as well as I do yours. I could identify every one of 'em."

"And you've kept mum all these months!"

"You bet your life I have!" Carmody took off his slouch hat and mopped his forehead. "I aimed on keepin' mum for good and all, but it commenced to git me, Sterrett. A man goes along, year after year, thinkin' he ain't got such thing as a conscience, and then all of a sudden something like this turns up and he finds out he's wrong. I took to hittin' the bottle, Sterrett. And carryin' a gun, too."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I aim to testify in court. I aim to keep my mouth shut until the last second, and then walk up there in that Rawhide court and speak my piece. That way there won't be a chance of them Association men shootin' me in the back."

"You shouldn't be seen talking to me."

His words seemed to make Carmody nervous. He looked around him and decided on another drink. He poured, slopping some on the bar.

"I know it, but still and all, I couldn't help thinkin' they had an idea what was in my craw. Two guns is better'n one, as the scripture says. Though maybe we could team up. That is, if you don't mind."

"I'd be glad to have you," said Griff Sterrett. "*Damned* glad!"

He started to say something more, but stopped abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Carmody asked.

"Nothing."

It was that tune—the same one he'd heard being whistled in the back room at the sheriff's office. It seemed strange that

he should hear it twice in one night after the passage of so many months—

"They feed in the coulee
They water in the draw . . ."

AFTER a moment he spotted the whistler—a slim man of middle height, just starting to gray around the temples, handsome in a thin-faced and frozen-eyed manner. He kept whistling the tune over and over, apparently unconscious that he was doing it, or that Griff Sterrett was watching him. He moved a trifle to one side, placing a slim panatela cigar in his strong, perfectly formed teeth. It brought his right side into view, revealing a pearl-handled pistol, carried low, and tied down with a thong.

He looked up, and for a brief instant his gaze met Sterrett's—then he looked away without apparent recognition or interest.

"Who is it?" he asked Carmody.

"Who is who?"

"That hombre with his gun tied down."

"I don't know." He watched Sterrett with a peculiar, half-smiling manner. "Why?"

"I just wondered."

"Can't say I ever met him. Stranger in these parts. There's been a heap o' strangers since the Stockmen's Association went on the prod."

Griff excused himself abruptly, telling Carmody he would meet him later at the stage office, and left by the front door. Two long strides took him to the corner of the building. No one was in sight as he turned down the narrow, bottle-littered passage between it and the harness shop next door. He reached the alley and walked more by feel than sight to the rear entrance of the Gold Bar House.

A light from an upstairs hall lit the stairs. He climbed quietly. The hall was deserted. He took the sheriff's key from his pocket and glanced at the number on its brass tag. Twelve. Number twelve was locked. He opened the door. The room was a well of blackness. He scratched a match and tossed it inside. It struck the rough board floor and burned with a dwindling, reddish flame. The room was empty.

"Spooky!" he said out loud, and went in to light the lamp.

It was cold in the room. He blew out the lamp, took off his boots and trousers, and

lay down, pulling a blanket over him, and went to sleep.

Something awakened him. He lay on his back, staring into the darkness overhead, listening. The wind swayed the big, ramshackle building, creaking it, clattering its windows. He groped for his gun and sat up. The floor was rough and cold on his bare feet. He could hear someone moving around in the next room. Someone going to bed. He exhaled, started to put the gun away, and stopped. It was the tune again—the same whistling.

"They feed in the coulee
They water in the draw . . ."

The sheriff's words came back to him—"Nobody except the clerk and I know what room you have."

* * *

The thing became clear in his mind. The sheriff had warned him of danger merely to gain confidence and make the job easy. He was a fool for not guessing before. It was the rule rather than the exception for law officers to be owned by the big cattle interests.

He scratched a match and glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes past midnight. It was still an hour and forty minutes before the Rawhide coach left—if it was on time. He pulled on his clothes and stepped soundlessly into the hall. The whistling had stopped.

He descended the rear stairs, circled through an alley and reached Main street. A lamp burned in the express office, but the window was misty so he couldn't see inside. He opened the door.

"Hello, Sterrett!" said Carmody.

The man sat sloppy and hunch shouldered near the heating stove. The agent was sound asleep with feet on the desk.

"I wasn't expectin' you so soon," Carmody added.

"I didn't want to miss getting to Rawhide."

Carmody smiled. He seemed to have bucked up some since earlier that night. Sterrett sat down back of the stove. His face in the long-slanting lamp rays looked deeply lined.

Carmody said, "You couldn't lend me a

five? The fare's eight and a half, and I ain't got it."

Griff went down in his pocket and handed over a five-dollar gold octagonal.

The big, pendulum clock over the agent's desk reluctantly ticked away the minutes. After an interminable wait, a skinny, rusty complexioned fellow entered by the back door and warmed his hands over the stove.

"Snow," he said.

"Snowing out?" the agent asked, coming awake.

"It will be."

THE COACH arrived almost on time at quarter past two. Nevada, the driver, climbed down stiffly and stomped off toward Shorty's Saloon for his station drink, while a couple of hostlers chanked the six-horse team. Sterrett climbed aboard followed by Carmody. There were two women and a man in the coach. The man was short and perfumed, probably a drummer; one of the women was young and pretty, the other was older. They looked like mother and daughter.

Griff lifted his hat, and the girl smiled at him. Her mother looked at him with little favor, and with even less at Carmody.

Several minutes went by with the fresh horses jerking, impatient to be off. Nevada's voice sounded close outside. The coach door opened and a man climbed in. Only his silhouette was visible, but something about his movements was like a jolt to Sterrett. He knew who the man was. He was the graying gunman—the whistler.

The young woman moved over, giving him room to sit down. Nevada cracked a few parting jokes to the station crew and swung to his high seat. He unwound his

long lash, and the team started as though struck by birdshot, taking the coach on its lurching way between the scattering lights of Carter Flat's main street to the vast darkness of the prairie beyond.

"When do we get to Rawhide?" the man asked.

It was too dark to see his face, but Sterrett sensed the question was asked of him.

"About ten," he answered.

The coach after its first wild apurt rocked monotonously. The mother snored in a well-behaved, ladylike manner.

"Mind if I smoke?" asked the man.

"Not at all," the young woman answered.

Sterrett could hear the little, crackling sounds of paper being twisted unto shape. A match spurted to flame, bringing the close interior briefly into view, and then it went out leaving only the burning cigarette coal. Carmody, without asking the permission of anyone, gnawed off a chaw of tobacco.

Sterrett asked, "How many changes between here and Rawhide?"

He'd put the question to the gunman, but it was Carmody who answered, "Two. Rosswell's and Dry Springs."

Sterrett wondered how the gunman planned to kill him. At one of these two stations, probably . . .

* * *

Wind came through the door cracks, carrying a fine spray of snow. Outside the air was thick with rolling clouds of snow. The coach slowed as Nevada picked his way along the unmarked prairie trail. An hour later the snow had commenced to drift. The coach stopped, and jerked for-



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ward again. After another half-hour of slow going there was an abrupt change in equilibrium—a steep downward pitch, then the soft sound of wheels sunk in snow, and the coach rolled easily on what was apparently dry ground.

The gunman opened the door and leaned outside. It was completely dark; the smell of musty hay filled the coach. Nevada lighted a lantern and held it up to the door. The coach had come to a stop inside a long, hay-roofed shed.

"This is the old Flyin' R," he said as he helped the two women to alight. "It's gettin' so I can't follow the trail. We'll be safe here till she blows herself out. There's a house yonder up the coulee, and I got some emergency grub in the boot jest in case."

He took time to unhitch the horses, then went ahead with the lantern, breaking through growing drifts to a large, log house.

The front door scraped as it opened, and the place had a cold, abandoned smell. Nevada set the lantern on a table and made shavings in a rusty cookstove. He tossed in a match, and the blizzard's draft was like a bellows, bringing a quick red glow to the stove top.

The downstairs was one large room. Two tiers of bunks had been built along a side wall. At one end of the room some rickety stairs climbed to the second story.

The gunman sat down next to Sterrett on a bench by the stove.

"My name's Taylor," he said.

"Sterrett."

They shook hands. Sterrett noticed that his hand was long and supple, uncalled but muscular.

Taylor said, "I met you in Dodge City four years ago. You were trail boss for some Texas outfit."

Griff had been trail boss for the Block B, but he didn't recollect Taylor. He decided the gunman was lying to get his confidence. His next move would be asking Griff to go with him to the coach for something he had forgotten.

The gunman kept talking. General things. The cattle business, the administration of President U. S. Grant. The drummer went to sleep in his chair. Even night-driving Nevada drowsed by the fire.

Nevada roused himself, blinking, dragged

an old soogin from one of the bunks, and draped it from a rafter giving a measure of privacy to one end of the room.

"You ladies can bed down thar," he said. "It ain't the Stockman's House in Cheyenne, but it's better'n a snowbank."

The two women withdrew behind the improvised partition, and each man chose himself a bunk. Griff rolled up in one of the lowers, with the drummer choosing the one at his feet, and Carmody the one at his head. Griff had an idea that Taylor would climb into the one immediately above, and that was exactly what the man did.

Nevada blew out the lantern.

Griff lay on his side, listening for the little sounds that Taylor made just above. At the far side of the room two little circles of yellow emerged from the darkness—the fire glowing around stovelids, and below were a series of rectangles marking the position of the draft. He rested his right hand on the butt of his unholstered six-shooter.

Time passed. Someone snored regularly. The drummer. From the bunk above there had ceased to be any sound. He was certain that Taylor was lying there, as wide awake as he was himself.

The wait seemed endless. Suddenly Griff's senses became acute. He must have dozed, but he was not dozing now. He propped himself up, the gun in his right hand. He sat and with a gentle movement placed his stockinged feet on the floor. He stood and took a step. His wool sox clung to the slivery floor, pulling loose a tiny, ripping sound that cracked explosively in the big, quiet room.

He sensed someone off in the darkness. Neither sight nor hearing had revealed the man's presence, but Sterrett knew he was there.

He stood quite still. A tiny glow now marked the position of the windows, so dawn was not far off. The glow of one window was cut off, and then reappeared. The man was moving to the right.

GRIFF decided that the man was Taylor. He had climbed down, and that was what awakened him. He probably had lifted someone else's gun and was creeping back toward his, Griff Sterrett's bunk with the intention of pumping bullets into it.

There was a rustle near his bunk, a tiny thud—and on the instant the room was torn by flame and explosion. Two shots—one close on the other. He had cocked his own gun, but stopped without pulling the trigger, fearing that one of the others might be in his line of fire.

Men and women were shouting. The room surged with movement. Nevada bellowed curse and struck a match. For the instant it was light with grotesque shadows moving along the walls. A gun whanged, and Nevada cursed louder and more profanely, flinging the match to the floor.

It now seemed twice as dark as before, and suddenly silent. Griff stepped to one side. He rammed someone and instinctively grappled, but he was off balance. The man spun from his grasp, striking with the barrel of a six-gun. The blow hit Sterrett's wrist, hammering his gun to the floor.

He sensed a bullet coming and dived headlong. His hands worked rapidly across the rough boards, searching for his fallen gun. He found nothing.

He heard the scrape of boots as the man turned, and twisted aside. The gun ripped flame, its bullet tearing splinters from the floor, stinging the side of Sterrett's face.

He sprang up, and something struck the calves of his legs. He stumbled, and caught himself on the stairs.

It was death to stay below, unarmed. He climbed the stairs, silently as he could, but cold and disuse made them creak under his weight.

The upstairs seemed to be one single, large room. The ceiling was made of shakes nailed over cottonwood poles. Here and there the shakes were gone and snow had sifted through.

He knew someone was coming up the stairs. Either that or the steps were creaking back into place.

Downstairs one of the women was crying. Nevada was cursing loudly and regularly.

Griff Sterrett felt through his pockets. He had a knife, a short-blade stockman's knife. He opened it, and closed it again. The thing would be useless. He felt overhead, found a cottonwood roof pole, and twisted it back and forth, freeing it.

The pole was about five feet long and two inches in diameter.

He stood quite still in the cold, dark attic, the club ready, waiting. He wasn't certain that anyone had followed upstairs.

A board creaked from a man's weight. A shadow was just vaguely visible against the glow finding its way through the broken roof. He started forward with the club upraised, and suddenly checked himself.

It was not Taylor who was facing him. It was a squat, heavy-shouldered man. "Carmody!" he breathed through clenched teeth.

Light from the roof hole played dimly along the six-shooter in Carmody's hand. It was aimed at the sound of his voice. There were two clicks as the hammer was racked back.

"Carmody!" he cried. "It's me! Sterrett!"

Carmody laughed. The sound of that laugh, throaty and grim, told the story. Carmody was the killer.

Instinct told Sterrett to leap aside, but judgement overruled. The sudden movement would jar sudden death from Carmody's tense trigger finger. Instead, with a silent, sweeping movement, Sterrett swung the cottonwood pole.

It struck both bone and metal. The gun flamed, but the pole had knocked it aside. Sterrett could feel the whisk of the bullet, the sting of burning powder.

He sprang on, but Carmody anticipated this action. Carmody retreated trying to avoid a second swing of the cottonwood pole. He pulled the trigger again as the club slammed him aside the head, driving him to the floor.

Unexpectedly, someone rammed Sterrett from the side. It was the first he realized there was another man in the attic. He reeled away, as Carmody fired at point-blank range, the bullet missing by a foot or so.

Another gun ripped darkness. There was a fragmentary pause, then two shots, both from the third man back in the middle of the room.

Carmody sucked breath a couple of times. His gun thudded as it fell.

"You all right?" asked the voice of Taylor.

"Yes," answered Sterrett.

A match flamed in Taylor's fingers. He

(Continued on page 98)

By Joseph
Chadwick

Ride the

The gun-boss of the Pecos burned the brand of Cain on greasy-sack cattleman Jim Marlowe, then put a Winchester steel-jacket in his back to cinch the deal. . . . But the dead returned to that burned-out range to buck the kill-hungry combine—sided only by a broken, crippled-up old mountain man and a herd of thirst-tortured crow-bait longhorns!

CHAPTER ONE

Night Rider's Range

MARLOWE heard a sudden pounding of hoofs as he neared the draw, and caught a glimpse of a rider loping away through the thickening dusk. It was a suspicious move, though the rider had a right to stop any place he wanted to on the open range—and just as much right to high-tail it in a hurry. So Marlowe had no reason to give chase. But he was curious, and he continued toward the draw, now dust-dry in the drought-blighted Pecos, to investigate.

He caught the odor of wood smoke as his horse climbed, then, topping a sandy rise bare of grass, saw the glow of the fire. Not a campfire, but a branding fire. A frown gathered on Marlowe's angular face, and the question arose, *Now who would bother to brand on a dying range?*

He dismounted, and moved down into the arroyo leading his big brown gelding. Part of the answer was there for Marlowe to read. A running-iron lay by the fire, its tip still hot. A hogtied calf lay squirming beyond, and from the parched brush a hundred yards away a cow—doubtlessly the mother animal—was bawling mournfully.



Jim waited until they were almost on him before he fired.

By Joseph
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Ride the Devil's Death-Watch

Action-Packed Cow-Country Novel

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The slug caught the rider right in the belly.

Devil's Death-Watch

Action-Packed Cow-Country Novel



The slug caught the rider right
in the belly.

To a cowman's mind, a running-iron meant a rustler. And rustlers left their marks on scorched hair and burned hide. A brand was as good as a name. Marlowe stepped over to the calf to get the rest of the answer, then swore softly. His muttered oath was not so much one of anger as of bewilderment, for the calf was branded with his own M77 mark!

Marlow's astonishment was so great his senses were dulled. Bewilderment caused him to concentrate so heavily upon the mystery before him, that he gave no thought to the possibility that other riders might be near. So he was caught completely off guard when a voice growled, "All right, you! Throw up your hands!"

Marlowe obeyed, knowing that the threat in the voice was backed up by a sixgun or a Winchester. He turned slowly, cautiously, and saw two riders atop the eroded bank he had descended. The light was all but gone now, but he recognized the pair as A-H hands—riders for the big Adobe House Ranch. One was Jeess Lomax, the outfit's manager. The other was a puncher named Pete Wills. Both men held six-guns. They came riding down, reined in, and their range-wise eyes took in the deal at a glance. And misread it.

Lomax swore wickedly, said, "So this is what you're up to, Marlowe!" He was big in the saddle, a brute of a man. The lower portion of his heavy face was black with a week's stubble of beard. He gave Marlowe no chance to talk. "Pete, this is something the Colonel ought to see. Tell him to come over here. Then you rustle that cow out of the brush. It's sure to be this dogie's mother—and a Durham-blooded critter."

Pete Wills swung about, rode from the draw in a hurry.

Marlowe said, "Jess, you've got it wrong. I didn't brand that calf. I rode in here only a minute before you showed up." He started to lower his arms.

There was an ominous metallic click as Lomax thumbed back the hammer of his gun. "Don't try it!" he warned. "You grab for your gun, and I'll gut-shoot you, sure!"

It was in his narrowed-down eyes. He was ready to kill, and more than willing. Marlowe felt a chill along his spine. He knew he was as close to death as he'd ever been. Jess Lomax's thoughts were easy to

read at this moment; the burly boss of the A-H hated nothing on earth so much as a man who branded other men's cattle, and he was considering killing Marlowe. He was gauging his chances of getting away with it. The odds were in his favor. *He could claim*, Marlowe thought, *that I made a move for my gun*. But Lomax debated too long. More riders were coming up. Marlowe saw three appear over the arroyo's high bank. They came jogging down. Two were ranch-hands, and the third was Colonel Matthew Ames who owned Adobe House Ranch. They reined in, Ames saying, "What's the trouble, Jess?"

"You can see for yourself, Colonel," Lomax said. "Charlie, throw some brush on that fire. We need light here."

One of the A-H hands dismounted to obey. He quickly got the fire blazing high, and in its flickering glow Colonel Ames made out what Marlowe and Lomax had seen before him. Ames was a gray shade of a man, perhaps sixty years old. His right sleeve was empty; he had lost an arm during the war between the States. He had other wounds that had bothered him for twenty years. He existed, people said, on will alone.

He had been the first Texas rancher to settle in the Pecos country. After gazing long at the branding fire, the running-iron, and the trussed-up calf, he looked at Marlowe. His pale face was stiff with anger.

"This is my range," he said, "and that calf is part Durham." It was an accusation against which there was no defense. "Your own range is fenced, Marlowe, your cattle can't drift. And you graze Texas stock. You don't breed Durhams into your herd."

Marlowe still held his hands up, for Lomax kept his gun levelled. Marlowe said, "I didn't brand that calf, Colonel. I came riding by and scared off the man who was working here."

"A crazy story," Jess Lomax sneered. "That calf is branded M77—your mark."

A man shouted from out in the dark. It was the rider Pete Wills, dragging in a part-Durham cow. There could be no doubt in any man's mind, Marlowe knew, but that it had mothered the calf. But Marlowe had not expected anything different. As Ames had said, the M77 was fenced and its cattle couldn't drift onto A-H range. Marlowe

could feel a clammy sweat on his face. There was no way out of this. He couldn't understand it, so it would be futile to attempt to make these men believe that some unknown rider had been at work here.

Lomax said, a sort of jubilation in his voice, "Reckon if we paid his range a visit, we'd find a lot of Durham-blooded stock mixed in with his scrub Texas stuff." He stepped over, took Marlow's gun from its holster. "Colonel, there's a big cottonwood down by the river," he went on. "I say a rope over a tree limb is the only way to stop this kind of business."

Ames was watching Marlowe, with a puzzled frown. But he answered Lomax, curtly. "I don't hang rustlers," he said. "But I'm not letting any man get away with putting his brand on my cattle." He lifted his voice: "Charlie, put your rope on Marlowe. Tie him up like he did that calf."

Marlowe couldn't dodge the loop the man Charlie threw, not with Lomax primed to shoot him. Charlie, Pete Wills and the third A-H rider hogtied him on the ground. Ames made some sign to Jess Lomax, and the A-H's burly manager picked up the running-iron and shoved its tip into the fire. Then Lomax stepped over and ripped open Marlowe's shirt, barring his chest. Marlowe got the idea then, and cursed the lot of them.

Ames sat his horse like a stern-visaged judge on the bench. He had a funereal look, dressed in black as he was and his bony face gray with its pallor. "Marlowe, you're the only rancher along the Pecos who isn't facing ruin because of this drought," he said grimly. "Your Texas cattle are holding up better than cross-bred stock. You were foresighted enough to fence your range and make sure of water for yourself by setting up tanks. Considering all that, I can't understand why you'd prey on your neighbors."

"I told you, Ames—I didn't brand that calf!"

"The Pecos is lined with dead A-H cattle," Ames went on. "I've already lost more than half of my herds. . . ." He glanced at Lomax. "Jess is that iron hot?"

"Hot enough, Colonel!"

"All right; take it and brand this man with the M77 mark he likes so much," Ames ordered. "As a reminder not to ride A-H range with a running-iron."

MARLOWE struggled. He heaved and pitched, and it was almost more than the three A-H riders could do to hold him flat on the ground. Despite his bonds, he broke free of their grasp time and time again. He butted his head into Pete Wills's face, and Pete, cursing with pain and rage, grabbed out his gun and slammed down the barrel. Marlowe's head felt split open, his brain reeled, and a red-black mist befogged his eyes. Dimly he saw Jess Lomax bending over him, baring his teeth in a wicked grin. The branding-iron came toward Marlowe's chest; then the hot point touched flesh.

They held Marlowe still while Jess Lomax worked and Colonel Matthew Ames watched. He was dazed by the blow to his head, but he was not unconscious at the start. That welcome escape came slowly, after he muttered, "Ames, I'll pay you back for this—if it's the last thing I do!"

* * *

They rode away leaving Marlowe unconscious and still tied. And it was hours, after he came to, before he managed to work off his bonds. The burns on his chest were an agony, and his head throbbed with dull pain. He was unsteady on his feet, picking himself up, and he was sick to his stomach. But physical torment he could bear. It was the injustice of the punishment that filled him with rage. That running-iron had burned more than flesh; it had seared Marlowe's soul.

The fire had burned to ashes. Marlowe hunted around for his hat and sixgun, then, after finding them, staggered to his horse. He dragged himself to the saddle. He held the big zebra-brown in for a moment, while he gazed north across the dark Pecos land in the direction of Adobe House. He cursed in low tones. He knew that he was a little mad just then, a crazy man. He had had enemies before, but never had he hated as he now hated the A-H crew.

He rode west, toward his own range. His mind gnawed at what had happened, but nothing was any clearer. Marlowe couldn't begin to guess why that unknown rider had branded the M77 mark on the A-H calf. It could not have been one of his own crew, a man acting under some queer pressure of loyalty to the M77. . . . Marlowe

knew that his few hands were at his headquarters. He had left them there that afternoon when he rode for the Pecos, to view for himself the damage inflicted upon the A-H and other herds by the drought. He had seen the rotting carcasses, the dying animals. There was still gypsy water in the river, but the grass was grazed out along the river banks.

The cattle had to travel too far from grass to water, and back again; their strength failed making the endless trek. Many died when heavy with water, bogging down in the Pecos quicksand. . . . Marlowe had seen all that by just riding a small portion of the river, then, at dusk, he'd come upon the mysterious business in the draw.

No, he could not understand it. He could only arrive at one explanation: somebody was deliberately trying to make trouble for him. The scheme would have worked out even if he hadn't accidentally happened by to be caught there by the A-H crew. *That somebody knew Ames and his riders would come by that draw*, Marlowe told himself. *Knew that the calf would be found*. Marlowe muttered an oath. It was becoming a little clearer. Jess Lomax had come to the draw with Pete Wills—drawn there by no obvious reason. Jess Lomax, then, had known beforehand that something unusual would be found in that lonely spot. *Lomax!* Marlowe thought, and swore again. He lifted his horse into a lope.

The M77's east drift fence stood thirteen miles from the Pecos. Marlowe passed onto his own range by a gate that was rigged and weighted to swing closed behind him. Like the other Texas ranchers that had settled in New Mexico, Marlowe was on open range. He had put up his fences in the face of the custom that said land in public domain should not be enclosed. Last winter a Government inspector had come by and objected to the fences. Marlowe had taken him out in a blizzard and shown him how necessary his barbed wire was at such a time. The fences had kept his cattle from drifting with the storm, toward the badlands to the south, and the inspector, convinced, had said he would report to Washington before ordering Marlowe to pull up his posts and fill in the holes.

They envied him more for his four water tanks, now that they faced ruin by drought. Marlowe on coming to the country had re-

called how Goodnight, greatest of cowman, had called the Pecos River lands "the graveyard of the cowman's hopes." and he had prepared for a bitter struggle.

He had dug four wells, erected windmills over them, scraped out tanks to hold the water pumped from beneath the ground. His cattle did not need to travel killing miles from grass to water, and so he was keeping his range from becoming a graveyard.

Marlowe reached the nearest water tank. He dismounted and ducked his head, and the cool shock of the water eased his throbbing pain. Then, wiping his face dry, he stiffened and stood listening. The screech of the windmill was loud in the quiet night. But one sound was missing. There was no gushing from the tank's feed pipe. Panic caught hold of Marlowe. His water was failing. This well had gone dry!

CHAPTER TWO

Longhorn Graveyard

MARLOWE'S tanks stood at the corners of a ten-mile square, and he made a circuit of them that night—a ride that took him until dawn. Both wells at the eastern side of the square had gone dry. A dwindling trickle of water came from the well at the southwest corner. Only the well nearest the M77 headquarters was holding its own. Marlowe dismounted there at the northwest tank, hunkered down with his back to a rack that helped form the tank's sides. He rolled a quirly and smoked, darkly considering the situation.

Marlowe was determined not to go down in ruin with the other Pecos ranchers. But a voice in his mind mocked. *What can you do, Marlowe?*

He had expected to drive a thousand cattle to the railroad in the early fall. He could throw those cattle onto the trail now, in early July, and perhaps get most of them through. But his stock cattle would remain in this dying range. And with his breeding herd decimated, he would be ruined. There had to be another solution.

The sun began to show, climbing into a cloudless sky. It would be another scorcher, with no rain. Marlowe looked out at his cattle, scattered in small bunches for miles about. Ranch headquarters was north five miles, and a rider was coming from that

direction. It was old Cly Adams, who kept the windmills lubricated. Old Cly was a left-over from early frontier days; he had been a fur trapper, a buffalo-hunter, a gold-seeker, and worked at all sorts of trades. He was stiff and slow-moving now, with rheumatism. He had come by one day a year ago, seeking a hand-out meal, and stayed on to become a pensioner at the M77.

He rode an old dun that never moved faster than a jogging trot. Reining in, he nodded and said, "Howdy, Jim." He dismounted stiffly, came over to the tank with his oil can. His gray beard was rusty with tobacco stain. Old though he was, his eyes were keen. Cly Adams saw the burns on Marlowe's chest. Marlowe's shirt stood open, for the buttons had been ripped off by Jess Lomax's savage grasp.

"Grease is good for burns," Cly said, holding out his can. "Oil's next best. Try it, Jim. It'll ease the pain."

Marlowe tried it. He poured oil into the palm of his hand, smeared it over his chest. The burns hurt, even when touched gently. Cly watched, but asked no questions. Marlowe told him exactly what had happened at that draw over near the river. It did him good to talk. The old man wouldn't let it go farther. He hunkered down beside Marlowe.

"Somebody's trying to make war between you and the A-H," he said. "Jess Lomax might be in on it, since he turned up there just at the right time to find the fire and the running-iron and the A-H calf marked with your M77 brand. But what's his game, if he's the one?"

"He's as loyal to the A-H as a man can be to the outfit he rides for," Marlowe said. "Maybe he's bearing a grudge because up until now I haven't been hurt by the drought like the A-H."

"It's more than that. A man's got to have a better reason for such devilry," Cly said. Then, after a lengthy pause: "Jim, your water is giving out."

Marlowe nodded. "I know," he said.

"What do you aim to do?"

"What can a man do?"

"You ever been up to the high plains? What they call the Llano Estacado—the Staked Plains?" Marlowe's reply was a shake of the head. Cly went on, "I was, more than once. Buffalo hunting. With the Langley brothers, and a couple others. It

was when the herds were getting small, and we had to travel hundreds of miles to get a few hides. We crossed the Plains from Texas, ended up at what's called Four Lakes. Salty water, but plenty of it. And those lakes never run dry. And there's more grass than you ever saw, bucko. Curly buffalo grass, and black grama. Miles and miles of it that never saw cattle."

"That's not how I heard it told," Marlowe said. "The Army scouted those high plains, the Texas Rangers too. And others. Some of them blamed near died of thirst."

"Sure. But they weren't following buffalo."

"You figure I could save my cattle by moving them there?"

"I know you could," Cly replied. "You could start a better ranch than you've got here. That country is empty. The buffalo are about gone, and no ranchers have settled there yet. To make sure, we could tear down our windmills and take them along on wagons. The Llano Estacado will never be the graveyard the Pecos is."

Marlowe frowned in thought, and finally said, "I'd have to scout it first."

"Good idea," Cly Adams told him. "I'll draw you a map."

He took out a pocket knife and with the blade point drew his map of the Llano Estacado on the sandy Pecos ground.

MARLOWE had talked so long with Cly Adams that it was mid-morning when he rode into ranch headquarters. His crew—a small one of four regular hands—was out on the range. Big Luke, the cook, was scouring pots and pans outside the chuckhouse doorway. The belly-robber flashed a toothy grin, and said, "You got a visitor, boss."

Marlowe had already seen the A-H branded pinto standing before his small stone house. He off-saddled, drew a pail of water from the home well, noting that it was low, and watered the gelding. There were no horse traps at the M77; the saddle stock was turned loose and had to be rustled when needed. Marlowe passed the bunkhouse, strode toward the ranchhouse. He was hungry, but breakfast could wait until he found out what this A-H rider wanted. He was puzzled that he should have such a visitor, after last night's trouble.

It was a one-room house built of Pecos

rock, the interior dim and cool. Marlowe pushed open the door, stepped inside and halted dead. It was a girl. It was Colonel Matthew Ames' daughter, Christine, who visited the Adobe House Ranch only in the summer. Winters she spent in Denver—going to school or teaching school, Marlowe didn't know which. He had met her riding the range half a dozen times, on one or two occasions stopping to talk with her. She was a tall, handsome girl, as different from her sickly father as day from night. She had tawny blonde hair, cool gray eyes, full lips that were quick with a pleasant smile. But she wasn't smiling now. There was uneasiness, maybe fear, in her eyes.

She had been seated by the table, leafing through a mail order catalogue, but Marlowe's entrance had brought her to her feet. She wore a mannish shirt, a divided doe-skin skirt, fancy stitched star boots. A gray Stetson and a braided quirt lay on the table. Her voice was off key, saying, "Please pardon me for coming here, Mr. Marlowe. But I . . ."

As her voice failed, Marlowe said, "You have no reason to feel that you're not welcome."

"After last night. . . ."

Again her voice failed. Her gaze fell on Marlowe's partially exposed chest. The color faded from her cheeks.

"Who told you about it?" Marlowe asked. "Not your father?"

"No. It was Charlie Shane," the girl replied, getting control of herself. "My father didn't want me to know about it, but Charlie—well, he's a man who likes to talk. I'd asked Charlie to saddle a mount for me, so I could ride a little. I decided then to ride down here."

"Why?"

"To ask you not to let this thing go farther," Christine said earnestly. "Such trouble could grow into a range war. I thought that if I talked to you, we might straighten things out."

"You forget that I was the victim, Miss Ames."

"My father—the A-H riders—felt victimized, too."

"I denied being a rustler," Marlowe said, frowning. "I didn't brand that calf. The A-H wasn't victimized by me. Something blamed queer is going on. The evidence was there—planted evidence, to my way of

thinking—and it damned me. Somebody wants to make trouble for me. And my idea is that Jess Lomax is that somebody. He happened by that draw without reason, at the right moment, just as though he'd known there was something to be found there. The Colonel was handy, too. And he gave me no chance to clear myself. I was the victim, all right."

The girl was studying his face, and Marlowe could see that she was inclined to believe him. There was uncertainty in her eyes.

"My father was in the saddle all day, riding along the Pecos to inspect the damage to his herds," she said slowly, "That explains his coming by that draw. Jess Lomax and the A-H riders were with him. I can't explain Jess' turning into the draw, unless it was to look for dead or dying cows. The Colonel isn't himself these days, Mr. Marlowe. Like all ranchers seeing themselves ruined by the drought, he's under a great strain. Perhaps he was too hasty, but if you will only understand his side of it, I'm sure you'll not let this trouble grow into a feud."

"You expect me to forget what happened?"

"I'd hoped that you would be reasonable."

Marlowe shook his head. "It's not something a man can forget," he stated. "I'll carry a reminder of last night as long as I live. It's not so simple, Miss Ames. This is a debt I owe Adobe House Ranch, and it's a debt I'll pay."

"My father is a cripple," Christine said, the beginning of anger in her voice. "He's sickly. He never goes armed."

"I think," Marlowe told her, "this is not a matter a woman can understand."

He saw the fury in her eyes. She turned to the table, picked up her hat and quirt, then swung back to him. "And you'd thank me not to meddle, is that what you mean?" she said flatly. "Perhaps I should warn you, instead of pleading with you. The A-H is a big outfit, and it's riders are loyal. My father may not be able to fight with a gun, but Jess Lomax is—and will. And it may be, Mr. Marlowe, that you'll end up as Jess Lomax wanted you to end up last night, with a rope around your neck!"

She strode past Marlowe, and was gone from the house before he could say more.

He turned to the doorway, watched her mount the pinto pony. She held the horse in, once settled in the saddle, and gazed at Marlowe with intense dislike.

"You're warned, Marlowe!"

"I'm grateful," Marlowe said mockingly.

"Oh, *damn* you!" Christine Ames cried, and dug her heels into the pinto.

She swung her little mount about, viciously, and rode away at a gallop. Marlowe stood looking after her, until she was far across the range. He found himself thinking of her, not as an enemy, but as a desirable woman. And he wondered to what sort of man she would one day belong. The truth was, Christine Ames had unwittingly cast a spell over Jim Marlowe. For the first time he was aware of how incomplete was a womanless place like his M77 Ranch.

BUT not for any woman, no matter how desirable, would he cancel his debt to the A-H outfit. What form his revenge would take, Marlowe did not know. He would start with Jess Lomax, of course, but even that must wait. First things first. Marlowe kept thinking of his talk with old Cly Adams. There was a chance that the oldster knew what he was talking about when he said that the M77 could be saved by moving to the Llano Estacado. It was old Indian country, Comanche territory, a land of mysterious mirages for white men. It had been damned by the few white men who had penetrated it on surveying expeditions, but they had not penetrated those high plains as deeply as the buffalo hunters. By sundown, when Cly Adams and the crew came in, Marlowe's mind was made up.

He said, "Cly, in the morning we'll start for the Staked Plains."

The old man's whiskery face lighted up. "You taking me along?"

Marlowe nodded. "Best to have a guide," he said.

"What about your trouble with the A-H outfit?"

"That can be settled later."

"I've been thinking about that all day," Cly said. "You know, Jim; whoever the hombre was who branded that calf might have figured on grabbing your range for the water. Nobody outside the M77 knows the wells are drying up. In a shoot-out fight with the A-H, our little outfit would be sure to be whipped. That'd leave your range

wide open for somebody to grab. The A-H might be the one to do the grabbing."

"If that was Ames's game, he'd would've strung me up—to get me out of the way," Marlowe reasoned. "Ames didn't want that, though Lomax was keen for it."

"Then Lomax's is your man, sure."

"How so?"

"Ames always gives his manager's a sizable interest in his ranches," Cly said. "He did at his Panhandle ranch, and his big pasture over at Gonzales in Texas. Lomax is sure to have the same deal."

Marlowe nodded. The picture was becoming clearer, and, just as he had suspected, Jess Lomax was the trouble-maker. Lomax had the motive. The man's loyalty to the A-H was explained; a man with a part interest in a ranch would stand by it through hell and high water, and, if he were unscrupulous, he would pull almost anything to safeguard that interest. It was possible that Lomax had hoped to start a feud between Marlowe and the Adobe House Ranch, so that he could grab the M77 range—with the water he believed was there.

Marlowe said, "Well, his scheme didn't work, because Ames wouldn't hang a man who looked like a rustler." He gave Cly Adams a wry grin. "We'll make Lomax a present of the M77 range after I have a showdown with him—and providing we move to the high plains."

The northwest windmill was still pumping water when Marlowe and Old Cly rode out at dawn the next morning. Leading a pack-horse, the two riders headed east. Marlowe looked over his cattle, and saw how they were grazing closer to the northwest tank. That proved that the other three tanks were empty. Soon the grass would be gone from about the one remaining watering-place, and the cattle would have to travel farther and farther between it and their graze. Then disaster would get a foothold. That was how it had begun for the A-H and the other ranches.

Marlowe and his companion left the fenced M77 behind, crossed the open range claimed by Adobe House, and neared the boggy Pecos. Near the river, they met a freight wagon bound for Ralston. His rig was rattling emptily, having delivered a load of supplies at the A-H or some other ranch to the north. He reined in his four-

horse team, and Marlowe halted alongside. Cly Adams stopped with the pack-animal.

"You hear the news?" the freighter asked. His name was Reb Bates. "Colonel Ames, up at the Adobe House, was bush-whacked."

Cly Adams made a clucking sound.

Marlowe said, "Ames killed—murdered?" incredulity in his voice.

"Looks like," Bates replied. "He rode out alone at sundown, yesterday. They tell me at the A-H that the Colonel had a habit of doing that. Riding alone at dusk. Well, this time his horse came back without him. With a bloody saddle. Jess Lamox took the crew out to hunt Ames. When I left there this morning, they still hadn't found him." The freighter spat copiously of tobacco juice, then eyed Marlowe narrowly. "You have some trouble with Ames?"

"Yes. Night before last," Marlowe said. "Why? Is Lomax claiming I ambushed Ames?"

"Lomax is a loud talker, Marlowe."

"The lying son!"

"You better be able to account for your movements last night," Bates said. "That A-H crew sure hates your guts, and when they find Ames's body—if he's dead, which is likely—they'll be hunting you with a hanging in mind. I told them you weren't the kind of hombre to shoot an unarmed man from ambush, but it was like talking into the wind. That daughter of the Colonel's is taking it mighty hard. She didn't say anything or break down and cry, like a woman should. She just had Charlie Shane saddle up a mount, to do her own searching."

Bates fell silent, waited for either Marlowe or Cly Adams to make some comment. When they remained silent, he gathered up the ribbons and muttered, "Well, I got to be rolling." They let him go.

Marlowe's first impulse was to ride for the Adobe House, but then logic told him that the first A-H rider he met would try to use a gun on him. He thought, *To hell with it.* Aloud, he said, "Cly, we'll go on." No matter what he did now, he would be blamed for Ames's murder. His best plan was to find a new range for his cattle. But as he and Old Cly rode slowly on, fording the river, heading for the Llano Estacado, Marlowe felt that he was being caught in a trap from which there was no escape.

THEY halted and made camp at sundown, thirty miles east of the Pecos. It was a dry camp, for they had come upon no water since fording the river early that morning. But they had packed along two ten-gallon kegs, brim-full, as well as saddle canteens, and so could water their horses. The sun was a blazing red ball to the west, and the day was still hot, but here on the high plains a steady wind blew and gave relief. The lack of water on the Llano discouraged Marlowe. But Cly Adams said, "Tomorrow this time we'll be at Four Lakes. They're salty, but there's a fresh water spring nearby. Look at this grass, Jim. There's a world of it!"

It was true. The gently undulating miles in every direction were blanketed with the black, flag-topped grama. It was virgin range. All that was needed was water. Wells and windmills would help, in time, but Marlowe knew that there had to be surface water at the start. He asked Cly if he was dead sure of reaching water tomorrow.

"I was never more sure of anything," the old man replied.

They built a fire, cooked a meal, but the warning came before they had a chance to eat. Cly Adams sighted riders on the back-trail. He let out a yell, "Trouble, Jim!" the old buffalo-hunter had glimpsed the horsemen topping a rise. They had been silhouetted for a moment against the color-splashed horizon. Marlowe didn't wait to see them for himself. He grabbed the skillet and coffee pot from the fire, set them aside, then scattered the fire with his boot. Even as he took that precaution, Marlowe knew it was too late. Those riders must have sighted the smoke, and known it marked a camp.

"Listen, partner," Marlowe said. "I've never given you an order or asked a favor of you since you came to the M77. Now I'm doing both. I want you to saddle your horse."

Cly broke in, "You ain't letting me side you, Jim?"

"Sure; but in another way," Marlowe told him. "I want you to head back. You're to get the crew on round-up. They're to start driving the cattle east. Take them to the Four Lakes country. Send Johnny Ward to Ralston to hire some extra hands, and a couple of freight rigs. Take down

the windmills, pull up the pipes and sucker rods. Load up the whole business and trail it along with the herd. You savvy?"

The old-timer didn't like it. He was itching for a fight. But he nodded. "You think you can hold off those hombres?"

"I'll hold them off until dark, then lose them," Marlowe replied. "Saddle up, and get going. Swing wide of them. If they try to close in you, open up with that Sharps buffalo gun of yours."

Cly brightened, seeing that he might have a chance to do some shooting. He had left his condemned dun back at the ranch, and was on the trail with a rangy sorrel. He saddled the animal, then loaded the Sharps he carried in a scabbard made from the tops of a pair of old boots. He was taking his time, trying to make sure of a fight. Marlowe saddled up his zebra brown, then packed the gray mare with the camp gear, provisions and water kegs. He had seen there was time. The riders were still a mile off, coming on slowly. There were four of them in the lead, bunched up, and one some distance behind. Marlowe couldn't figure out why the fifth rider should be trailing the others.

The sun was gone, and a purplish dusk was thickening over the plains. Old Cly said, "Well, I'll be riding, Jim. Luck to you."

"Luck to you, Cly."

"S'long."

He headed out, his reluctance easily seen. But he obeyed Marlowe's orders and swung far to the south. Marlowe lost sight of him, out there across the expanse of grass. Darkness was closing in, and so were the A-H riders. Marlowe had never felt so alone. He had the pack-mare's halter rope tied to the brown gelding's saddle horn. He took his lass-rope and fastened the end, as a *bosal*, beneath the headstall on the brown's bridle. The other end Marlowe slip-knotted about his hips. He was ready, then and reasonably sure that his horses wouldn't bolt when he started shooting.

A rider loomed through the semi-darkness. He halted well beyond accurate six-gun range, and shouted, "You, Marlowe! You hear me?"

Marlowe was kneeling in the high grass. Afraid of some trick, since he no longer saw the fifth rider, he neither moved nor answered. The rider came on for perhaps

ten yards, and yelled out loudly again.

"Damn you, Marlowe!" he yelled. "You might as well give up. We aim to get you for bushwhacking the Colonel, and we'll get you if we have to chase you all over the plains!"

"You find Ames's body?" Marlowe called back.

The rider swore, accused Marlowe of having hid the body. Marlowe had him tagged now; it was Pete Wills.

"Is Lomax with you, Pete?" Marlowe shouted.

Pete yelled back that Lomax wasn't along. "But he'll be coming, with the rest of the crew. He's offered a bounty for your hide, Marlowe. You giving up, or you making a fight of it?"

Marlowe didn't answer. He was thinking, *So Lomax is willing to pay to get me out of the way.* . . . He had a bead on Pete Wills. If he shot the puncher out of the saddle, now, while he had the chance, it would help even the odds against him. But he couldn't bring himself to killing Pete in cold-blood. The silence grew long, then Pete bawled, "Have it your way, Marlowe!"

That instant guns crashed. Powder-flame streaked the gloom, and Marlowe heard the shriek of bullets. He opened up with his .45 firing calmly enough. But there was a leaden feeling in the pit of his stomach. Odds of five to one. And each of those five was anxious to kill him. Jess Lomax must have made the bounty a big one.

CHAPTER THREE

Bloody Night On the Pecos

FOUR of the A-H hands did the shooting. The whereabouts of the fifth rider puzzled and worried Marlowe. It was a reckless attack at first, the four coming at Marlowe at a gallop with guns blazing. They had spread out, making it harder for Marlowe to concentrate on a target. He missed his first two shots, then hit a horse with his third. The animal screamed, stumbled, collapsed. Its rider was thrown over the dead horse's head, and he lay sprawled in the grass. Marlowe missed a fourth shot, then knocked a man from the saddle with his fifth. The two men still mounted sud-

denly swung off, galloped out of range. There was a moment's lull, then the man whose horse had been killed started sniping.

He put a slug so close that Marlowe flinched. He fired again, and the bullet ripped through Marlowe's shirt and creased the flesh over his ribs. The pain was a hot sting; blood flowed. His .45 was empty then, and he knew that that is was time, and dark enough, for him to make a run for it. He couldn't make a break however with that sniper, a good man with a sixgun, so close.

For himself, Marlowe had more faith in a Winchester than in a Colt .45, and so he loaded the rifle. The other two A-H men had dismounted and unlimbered rifles. But they kept their distance, and their shooting was ragged. Marlowe concentrated on the sniper. He waited until the marksman's gun flashed, then fired twice. He hit nothing. A moment later the sniper's gun flashed from another spot, ten feet from his original position. He was a tricky one. He fired, crawled to another position, and kept that up. He kept down in the grass, never showing himself.

He was maneuvering himself off to Marlowe's left, and the other two wore to Marlowe's right. The three of them were boxing the M77 man in, slowly but methodically. He fired the seven rounds in his rifle, then reloaded. Marlowe found himself sweating, and his breathing labored. He knew that his time was running out, that he had to make his break within a matter of minutes—or never make it. The darkness he had hoped would be an ally was trapping him. *If he could only see that sniper!* The man hadn't fired for a time, doubtlessly having had to reload, but now his gun blazed again. Marlowe was ready. He squeezed out a shot the next instant, aiming a little to the left of the six-gun's flash, counting on the sniper to move that way. A cry of agony rang out. The sniper heaved up. Marlowe held his fire, somehow knowing that another shot was unnecessary. The sniper slumped down, and Marlowe saw no further movement.

There were three now, three to one. Two of them were off to Marlowe's right, at long range, and firing with no accuracy. The third rider was still unseen, his whereabouts a mystery to Marlowe. Rising to his knees, Marlowe fired twice at the two men to his right. He saw them duck and back still

farther away. He grinned wryly, then, crouching low, moved along the *bosal* rope until he reached the horses. He removed the rope, let it drop, took up the zebra brown's reins. The two A-H hands fired rapidly as he hit the saddle. Marlowe swung the brown about, to the left, jabbing in the spurs. His pack-mare was hit and went down, and Marlowe tore its halter rope off the brown's saddle horn. A bullet tore into him just as his mount hit a hard lope. Marlowe reeled, almost fell. He lost his rifle, but saved himself by grabbing the pommel with both hands. The big gelding was running hard, now, and Marlowe had only to hang on.

No more shots reached him, and there was no pursuit through the darkness. Marlowe hung on, but his grip grew weaker. His strength was failing, and, for all he knew, his life was slipping away. After a time, after a few miles, he knew nothing at all. . . .

THERE was a high, sickle moon. That was the first thing Marlowe saw when he regained consciousness. He was lying on his back, and his reeling brain began to hammer with the thought: *I've got to keep riding. They'll be closing in on me!* He was only blurredly aware of who "they" were, but desperately conscious of his danger. Finally he managed to pry himself up with his elbows. He saw his horse standing with trailing reins perhaps twenty feet away. It seemed twenty miles when he tried to reach the animal.

Marlowe got to his knees, and sprawled on his face. He got up that far again, on hands and knees, but couldn't make it to his feet. He crawled, then, slowly and painfully. Sweat drenched him. His breath came in agonizing rasps. He made it at last, grabbed the trailing reins just as the big brown shied away. Marlowe gritted his teeth and hung on, then got the horse turned about so that he could catch hold of the left stirrup. Marlowe dragged himself up the stirrup strap, grasped the pommel. He got his foot into the stirrup, and heaved himself up. Somehow he made it. He was as limp as a half-emptied grain sack in the saddle. The brown started out at a jogging walk, and Marlowe took the worst battering of his life.

The moonlight was crystal clear, and

Marlowe, blurred though his vision was at times, could see far across the plains. He found himself heading directly toward another rider, and, in alarm, swung his mount to the east. He lifted the brown into a lope, and that added punishment in a greater dose. After what seemed miles to Marlowe, but actually was but a short distance, he reined in and looked back. The rider was coming after him, not fast but steadily. Marlowe thought, *Only one, now?* But even one was too many. He couldn't put up a fight.

He went on again, then halted once more to look back. The rider was still on his trail, no nearer and not hurrying, but still coming. It went on and on like that, a cat-and-mouse sort of game. Finally Marlowe's vision faded. Strands of blackness crept over his mind, merged into a dark curtain. He felt himself slipping, toppling from the saddle, but he did not feel the jolt of landing. He was beyond feeling anything.

THE MOON was gone, and the sun was climbing. That was what Marlowe first saw when he regained consciousness this second time. He failed in an attempt to lift himself on his elbows. He could turn his head to look about, and saw, to his left, his zebra brown, and an A-H branded pinto, picketed and grazing side by side. He turned the other way, and, after one look, closed his eyes. He was seeing things. That wasn't the girl, Colonel Ames's daughter, beyond the campfire and seated on a heap of saddle gear—and gazing at him. Marlowe looked again. Christine was still there.

Her eyes were dulled, the corners of her mouth drooped. She was gazing at Marlowe, and not seeing him at all. He looked farther, as best he could, but there was no one else. Only the girl. He puzzled over it. He became aware that he lay in his blanket roll. He explored with his hands and found that his shirt had been removed. There was a thick bandage about his middle. His movements roused the girl. She came around the fire, stood looking down at him. She showed no feeling, neither hatred nor pity.

"So you're going to live, Marlowe?"

"You—?"

"I kept on your trail last night," she said flatly. "When Pete Wills and Charlie Shane got scared and turned back, I slipped

away from them and came on. I found you, Marlowe. I wanted to kill you. I followed you until you dropped."

"Then?"

"Then I couldn't do it," Christine told him, bitterly. "Murderer though you are, I couldn't do it. You lay there bleeding to death, and I was too weak to let it happen. I worked over you, Marlowe. I stopped the bleeding. The bullet went in your back and came out beneath your right ribs. You're a hurt man, but you're going to live. You're going to live—to hang!"

She turned away, but in a little while came back.

She knelt beside Marlowe, worked her right arm under his neck. She held his head up and gave him water out of his own canteen. He drank deeply, then sighed. She lowered his head, withdrew her arm, but remained kneeling. She was gazing at him in a different way now, her eyes wide and no longer dull. There was wonder in them. It turned to bewilderment, to confusion. Then, jumping up, she shrank from him. Marlowe saw all that, then knew no more. This time he slept.

The girl roused him, and then Marlowe saw that the day was nearly gone. The sun was low in the west. "Time for chuck," Christine said, and moved away. Marlowe was stronger. He could rise on his elbows. He saw that she had not been idle. She had located his dead pack-mare and brought in the camp gear, provisions, and water kegs. She had a meal on the fire.

She not only brought Marlowe chuck, she fed it to him after propping his saddle beneath his shoulders. She was as patient as though he were someone she cared about—as though he was not the man she believed had killed her father. Marlowe ate as much as he could, then she went away and with her back to him, ate by the fire. She kept away from him after that, until, when darkness settled over them, he called to her.

"Look; you've got to listen to me," he said. "I didn't kill your father. I'm not saying that thinking it'll save me from hanging, but because you've got to know the truth."

"You wanted revenge, Marlowe. You got it. Don't lie, now."

"Lomax," Marlowe said. "He's the man I would have settled with, not the Colonel.

Jess Lomax knew about that A-H calf being branded with my M77 mark. He had somebody do it, to make me look like a rustler. He figured your father would give him the chance to hang me. Lomax wants my range for the A-H herds—for what's left of them."

"You're lying, Marlowe."

"It's the truth, Christine."

And I suppose you'll accuse Jess of murdering my father?"

"I don't know about that," Marlowe said. "But maybe the Colonel found out what Lomax had pulled. If they had a fall-out and Colonel Ames threatened to break with him, Lomax might have lost his head and grabbed out his gun. Did they find your father's body."

Christine shook her head.

She left Marlowe, and returned to the fire. She sat there thinking, and he could see that she was thinking hard. He kept watching her until fatigue got the best of him. Marlowe slept soundly, and Christine had to grasp his arm and shake him awake. It was the middle of the night. Marlowe sat up, felt a sharp stab of pain but stayed sitting up. The girl was kneeling by him. Her hand remained on his upper arm. Her eyes had a bright, excited look.

"Marlowe, you may be telling the truth," she said. "The more I think about Jess Lomax, the more it seems possible to be as you say. He always acted as though the Adobe House was his own—the ranch and all that went with it. He even acted as though his interest in the A-H extended to me." She paused, breathless. "My father and he had a quarrel about something the afternoon following that trouble with you in the draw—and before my father rode out to be ambushed. Lomax could have ridden out in the dark, and done that ambushing!"

"I'd gamble he did, Christine."

"I've got to put it up to him!"

"Wait," Marlowe said, drowsily. "Wait until I can take the trail."

He fell asleep while the girl was still there beside him. Then waking, at sun-up, he found himself alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunhawk Gommorah

HIS first reaction was concern for the girl. But when he came shakily from his blankets. Marlowe realized that she

would come to no harm. An attractive woman had her own protective armor; Christine had said that Jess Lomax's possessive manner toward the A-H extended to her. Too, the man had no reason to fear her—so long as he kept her from voicing her suspicions to anyone outside Adobe House Ranch. None of the tough A-H crew, riders hand-picked by Lomax himself, would put any stock in her accusations. Lomax would brand them the hysterics of a bereaved daughter. . . . And Jim Marlowe would still be blamed for Colonel Ames murder.

No, the danger was not Christine's. It was still Marlowe's. So long as he was alive, Jess Lomax would know no security. Once Christine confronted him, the man would realize that more than ever. There would be another man-hunt, one led by Lomax himself and provisioned for an extended trip into the plains country. Marlowe thought, *I've got to get on the move*. Weak as he was, he had to mount and ride out. And his one hope seemed to be, if he was to outwit Jess Lomax, a return to the Pecos country. The A-H outfit wouldn't expect him to go back there.

Christine had left him his six-gun, along with the provisions and what little water remained. His zebra brown was still on picket line. There was only one handicap, his terrible weakness. Marlowe knew that he must get some solid food inside him. He set about making a fire.

* * *

It may have been that a man born to the saddle found it a better cure than lying idle in his blankets. At any rate, Marlowe bore up. He rode slowly but steadily, and, after the first hour or so, he felt more like his old self. By mid-day, his wound bothered him a little but did not break open.

He dropped down from the plains, and at sundown came within sight of the Pecos. He had seen no riders all day, but now he saw a crew working a great herd over the river at Apache Crossing. A few hundred cattle were already across, as were the chuckwagon, another rig, and the *remuda*. It was the M77 outfit, which meant that Cly Adams had carried out his orders. The crossing would be made, then the herd would be bedded down on the east side until

morning. Marlowe lifted his horse into a lope, and headed into the noise, dust and confusion of the drive.

It was full dark before the drag got across. Four new hands from Ralston were among the crew. One extra wagon was loaded with gear; the freight wagons loaded with the windmills did not show up. When Cly Adams came in for chuck, and found Marlowe there, he explained it.

"When I got back to the M77, Jess Lomax and half a dozen of his tough hands were there," Old Cly grumbled. "They'd got the jump on our crew. Lomax claimed that you were a goner, that the four hombres he'd sent after you would kill you. He said he was taking over the M77 for the A-H, because it was open range and shouldn't have been fenced—and that you were as good as dead anyway."

Marlowe scowled, but said nothing.

"Lomax let us take the chuckwagon and a load of gear, and make a quick round-up—though he told us it was senseless," Cly went on. "But he wouldn't let us take down the 'mills. Lomax rode out to the nearest tank and saw that water was still being pumped into it." The old man paused to chuckle. "He didn't notice it was a mighty poor stream. And he didn't know that the other three tanks are dry. I'd sure like to see that hombre's face when he finds out he's grabbed the M77 range for nothing!"

"Was Lomax still at the M77 when you started the drive?"

"He rode out when we got the herd moving, leaving his riders to gun-guard us," Cly replied. "They didn't disarm us, or bother us much. Just made sure we kept moving. Lomax headed back to the Adobe House. He knows by now that his four gunhawks didn't finish you off. How'd you give them the slip, anyhow? And wasn't there five of them?"

Marlowe told him about the fight, and how he had shot two of his four attackers. "The fifth one was the girl," he said. "Ames's daughter."

He had Cly remove the bandage from his wound, and replace it with a clean one. The oldster told him that—"it's healing slick as a whistle." Marlowe wasn't surprised; the wound was no longer painful, only annoying. But he was dead tired, and he left the crew still gathered about the fire and spread out his bedroll. He lay thinking

for a time, wondering what was to come next.

CLY ADAMS had to shake Marlowe to get him awake. It was in the middle of the night. Marlowe grunted and sat up, his body muscles stiff and sore. Except for the two hands riding night herd, the crew members slept. "What's up, Cly?" Marlowe asked.

"I've been out scouting," the old buffalo-hunter said, low-voiced. "Had the wind up, and couldn't sleep. The A-H outfit is up to something. They crossed the river, a mile north, and are hiding in the brush. I figure they know you're here in camp. Maybe some of them were watching us make the crossing and saw you come in."

Marlowe flung aside his blanket, started pulling on his boots. He told Cly to saddle him a fresh horse out of the *remuda*, but the oldster asked, "What you aim to do?"

"Clear out."

"Run from those no-goods?"

"If I stay, there'll be a gun-battle," Marlowe said. "I can't ask the boys to shed their blood for me—not for cowhands' wages."

Cly gave a scornful grunt. "They'll side you, wages or no wages," he growled. "They're spoiling for a fight. They're a mighty shamefaced bunch, for having let Lomax and his toughs run us off the M77. You're staying, Jim, and we'll side you. I'll wake the others."

He roused the others, and the regular M77 hands belted on their guns and stated they were ready to fight. The four extra hands from Ralston weren't quite so eager, so Cly sent them out to guard the herd and relieve the two men whose watch it was. Big Luke armed himself with a razor-sharp butcher knife and an ancient cap-and-ball Colt that he occasionally used for killing rattlesnakes. Marlowe got a Winchester and a box of cartridges from the gear wagon. Horses were saddled, and Old Cly brought Marlowe a rangy gray that, next to his zebra brown, was his favorite mount.

"Somebody coming," Cly said.

The rider was slow-walking his horse, and he sang out in good time, "Hello, the trail camp." Marlowe recognized him by his voice: it was Pete Wills. Cly answered, "What do you want, you A-H son?"

"We want Marlowe, and we aim to have

him," Pete Wills called back, having reined in far short of the trail camp. "We're ready to come in shooting, and down every mother's son that stands in our way. We outnumber you three to one. Think that over, hombres. Give Marlowe over to us, and nobody else'll be bothered." He paused a moment. Then: "Marlowe, you give up and we'll take you to Ralston for the law to deal with. You'll get a court trial for Ames's murder. But if you make a fight of it, we'll shoot you full of lead!"

Marlowe looked at the men about him. One of them muttered, "Tell him we don't savvy a blamed word he says!" And Cly Adams muttered, "He's lying, Jim. You give up, and they'll kill you."

Marlowe said, "It's up to you boys."

Cly said, "Sure." He lifted his voice, "Pete, you A-H sons can go to hell!"

Pete Wills yelled an oath, swung his horse, loped back up-river. The M77 hands scattered and took cover behind the wagons and what rocks and brush were at hand. Cly Adams started swearing. Marlowe saw the reason for it. The four Ralston men had left the herd, and were highailing it through the darkness. They wanted no part of the fight. The cattle were suddenly restless, as though instinctly knowing that danger threatened. Many of the critters were getting to their feet. Cly muttered that he would try to hold them. He mounted and rode out.

A M77 puncher yelled, "Here they come!" Marlowe and the others didn't need the warning, for the Adobe House crew came riding toward the camp without any attempt at concealment. Jess Lomax's arrogant voice bellowed, "Marlowe, you bushwhacker—this is it!" It was as though the burly A-H boss had told the lie so often he now believed it, himself.

There were at least fifteen riders in that reckless charge, and the A-H hands were known as the toughest men in the Pecos country. They came yelling and shooting, and Marlowe, blazing away with his Winchester, shouted, "Let 'em have it?" His M77 men had no reputation for wildness, but now, in the pinch, they proved themselves.

They poured their fire into the onrushing riders, not a man breaking in flight. Marlowe saw a horse go down with its rider, saw another A-H rider topple from

the saddle. A M77 man yelled in agony, caught at his middle, and fell headlong. Marlowe muttered an oath, and fired again and again. He downed a horse, but the rider rolled clear. The A-H crowd suddenly swerved and swept wide of the camp. They raced by, between camp and river, and were obscure fast-moving shapes in the darkness. But their guns blazed away, and Jess Lomax kept yelling. They swung about, coming in from the opposite side.

They hit the *remuda*, and the M77's rough-string broke out of its rope corral. Those half-wild mustangs stampeded into the camp, scattering the defenders. Marlowe swung onto his gray, and the animal, caught up in that surging wave of frightened horses, bolted as he hit the saddle. The A-H crew came in after the *remuda*, guns hammering. Marlowe's few men were caught in a maelstrom of confusion, and had to dodge stampeding horses as well as blazing guns. They fired back as best they could, but now there was little hope of holding out.

Marlowe yelled, "Save yourselves! Hit for the brush!"

He wasn't following that advice. He broke away from the *remuda*, swung his rifle up and fired into the jubilant A-H crowd. He considered himself doomed, and so was fatalistic. He tried to get in at the attackers, marking Lomax who was in the center of the group as his target.

But Lomax seemed to bear a charmed life. Marlowe's bullet couldn't touch him. Lomax fired at Marlowe, just as the M77 boss' spooked gray reared up. The gray took the slug, and Marlowe felt its great body shudder and collapse. He flung himself from the saddle, hit the ground hard. His knees buckled, and he pitched headlong under Big Luke's chuckwagon. There he heard thunder. For an instant he thought it was roaring in his head, from the jolt of falling, but it continued and grew in volume. The very ground shook, and Marlowe knew then the reason for it. The rumble came from the pounding of thousands of hoofs. The trail herd was in stampede.

Crazed cattle—turned wild by the gunfire and deliberately swung at the camp by a blast from Cly Adams' Sharps—raced by the chuckwagon beneath which Marlowe had been thrown. Some came so close the wagon was jostled, and pots and pans rat-

tled in weird symphony, but it did not overturn. The A-H crew was caught at the rear of the now milling *remuda* by the river bank and the cattle. They were trapped by horns and hoofs as the tidal wave of cattle engulfed them. Men and horses went down, men screaming and horses shrieking. Most of the A-H crew plowed through the *remuda*, however, and took to the river. The M77 crew, driven out of the camp by the horses, now had their turn. They blazed away at the riders fleeing across the Pecos. Marlowe scrambled from beneath the wagon, on the off side, and saw the burly Jess Lomax, mounted on a big black, race through the scattered M77 hands and escape into the darkness beyond. The man still seemed beyond reach of M77 bullets.

The herd was still stampeding by, old Cly Adams at the rear of it yelling and shooting his Sharps buffalo gun. It was a thing only an old buffalo-hunter would have tried, using a trail herd as a weapon. But he had saved the M77 crew, and Marlowe could find no fault with the old man for driving many of those cattle to their death in the boggy Pecos—for that was where the stampede was taking them. Marlowe's mind had only one thought, *Lomax mustn't get away.*

A saddled M77 bronc bolted toward him, and Marlowe caught its reins and pulled it down. Still gripping his rifle, he swung onto the skittish animal's back. He swung it about and used spurs. He shouted to his men, telling them he was going after Lomax. He rode on at a gallop, and a minute later saw Lomax fording the Pecos. The man was heading for Adobe House. *Like a whipped dog running for its kennel*, Marlowe thought savagely. He meant to keep after Lomax, no matter where he ran.

Marlowe was on a good cow pony, but the black Lomax rode was a better animal on a long, hard run. One short burst of speed, and Marlowe had to be content to

travel at an easier lope. Lomax lost himself in the darkness. But he was heading north, and Marlowe kept on across A-H range. Lomax's destination was certainly A-H headquarters. Something, though certainly not a refuge now that he had lost the showdown fight, was taking him there.

Marlowe wondered, *Christine?*

He doubted it. A man who had played a crooked game for high stakes and come out loser wouldn't at the very end bother with a girl who must certainly hate him. Lomax had abandoned his beaten crew and headed back to the ranch for some other reason.

The cow pony had endurance if not speed, and it held up mile after mile. Marlowe swung west, away from the river, and took the road that ran up from Ralston. It would take him straight to Adobe House. It led across the dry bed to Traders' Creek, through the breaks beyond, around Spire Rock. The pony's gait was ragged now, and his sides were heaving like over-worked bellows. The wind whistled through its nostrils. Marlowe muttered, "A little longer!" He could see the cluster of ranch buildings ahead. The windows of the big adobe ranchhouse were bright patches of lamplight. Someone was there, Christine or Lomax. Or both. Marlowe's mount began to stumble.

Half a mile short of the A-H headquarters, the animal was through. Marlowe reined in and left the saddle, rather than run the pony to the ground. He jerked the Winchester from the saddle boot, and went on afoot. His legs were wobbly, but he moved forward at a dog-trot. He reached a big cottonwood tree that stood a hundred feet from the house, and slumped against its thick trunk. A lathered, blowing black horse stood by the porch. The wide front door stood open, and Marlowe could see a corner of a room. Fitted into the corner was a roll-top desk, a lamp atop it, and a

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safe. Lomax was rifling the safe. He was stuffing something—money, certainly—into a pair of saddle-bags. Marlowe now knew what had brought the man back to the ranch. His scheme to save his interest in the ruined Adobe House had blown up in his face, so his next best chance—before flight from the Pecos country—was to grab what loot he could find. No doubt Colonel Matthew Ames had kept some thousands of dollars in that safe. Marlowe's mouth curled in an ugly smile.

Marlowe was first to hear the approaching rider. Lomax heard it an instant later and, with saddle-bags in one hand and six-gun in the other, came leaping to the doorway. The rider came galloping on, and reined in sharply. A groan escaped Marlowe. The rider was Christine.

The girl sat her blowing mount and gazed at Lomax. The bully A-H manager came across the porch, halted, stared at Christine in silence. Marlowe moved forward, still unseen in the darkness.

"So now you rob us, Jess," the girl said, bitterly. "Well, that's to be expected. I can't stop you, much as I'd like to. But maybe it would interest you to know where I've been."

"Maybe I don't give a damn," Lomax sneered. "But where were you?"

"To a Mexican sheep camp, back in the east hills," Christine said clearly. "And do you know what I found there? No, of course you don't." Her voice rose, slapped at Jess Lomax. "I found my father, Jess. Alive."

Lomax gave a violent start.

"Yes, alive," Christine went on. "Your bullet didn't kill him. When you trailed him that night and shot a bullet into his back, his horse bolted and carried him a couple miles before he fell from the saddle. A Mexican shepherd found him the next morning, and dad begged him to take him anywhere but back to Adobe House. He knew you'd shot him, Jess, because he'd told you that you were through here—that he would buy out your interest and you could go your way. He'd made you admit that you had one of your crew burn the M77 brand on that A-H calf. He'd never have suspected you, if you hadn't kept complaining because the Colonel didn't let you hang Marlowe. But you wouldn't give up

your share of the Adobe House. You figured that maybe you could own it all. So you rode out after my father, and back-shot him—then blamed it on Marlowe. But, Lomax, you'll never get away with this wild scheme of yours.

"And to think my father trusted the likes of you.

"He must have been mad!

"You're a blundering fool, Jess. You're a blundering . . ."

Lomax swore at her, jumped down from the porch and started on a dead run toward the girl.

Christine swung her quirt up, to strike at him.

Marlowe called out, "This way, Lomax! Over here!"

It was more of a chance than Marlowe figured Jess Lomax deserved. He gave the man time to whirl about, to swing his six-gun up. Then Marlowe fired. Lomax staggered, even as he blazed away with his Colt. He fired three wild shots, then turned and stumbled toward his horse. He didn't quite make it. Stumbling, he fell to his knees. But he clutched his loot-filled saddle bags to him, and kept hold of his sixgun. Marlowe moved in on him. Christine cried, "Marlowe, be careful!"

Lomax jerked his gun up, fired once more.

Marlowe shot him again, watched him wilt to the ground. He went over and kicked Lomax's gun out of his hand, but that was a needless precaution. Jess Lomax was dead. Marlowe's brand of Cain was avenged.

Marlowe went over and slumped down on the porch steps. The girl dismounted, came running to him. She bent over him, lay a hand on his shoulder. "He hit you?" she asked shakily. And sighed when he shook his head. Her obvious relief made Marlowe look up in wonder.

He saw it in her eyes a, reflection of his own upsurge of feelings. He reached up, drew her into his arms. And the eagerness with which she came to him told Marlowe that the new M77, up on the Llano Estacado, would not be a womanless place. Yes, indeed, life was just beginning for Marlowe. Musing to himself he felt good and thought it would be fine to bring the Colonel in on the deal. Yes, indeed, life looked fine.

THE END

A Killer for Christmas

By Barry Cord

On that night of Good Will Toward Men, Sheriff Thompson rode out to collect his last Christmas gift—wrapped in the smoke of snarling sixes!



The sheriff stepped out of the gloom as the horseman reined in.

THE SHERIFF was sitting in a four-handed game of blackjack in the *Last Chance's* back room when he got the word about the Kid. He knew it would happen like this some day, and now that it had come he couldn't avoid it.

He had his chair tilted back against the wall and the third cup of egg-nog was warming him as much as the roaring blaze

in the pot-bellied stove. He was facing the single window, idly contemplating the icicles pronging down across the panes, feeling a comfortable satisfaction that tonight was Christmas eve and things were quiet in Dawson.

"Pretty smooth," he said, referring to the egg-nog. He dropped forward and slid his empty cup to his deputy who had the egg-

nog bowl at his elbow. "Fill it up, Lanny."

Lanny Burke was carefully debating the wisdom of drawing another card or staying with his eighteen. He was a cocksure youngster with a streak of dry humor.

"Don't know if I should, Buck," he said, frowning. "'Nother one of these an' I'll have to help yore wife with the decorations tonight."

Sam Gaines shook his head. A big, red-faced, likeable man he owned the C Bar ranch just north of Dawson's Creek. "Look who's talking!" he snorted. "Young feller—Buck and me was drinking these things long before yore maw weaned yuh!"

The door opened behind the sheriff and Tom Blake, the bartender, said: "Buck. There's a gent out here wants to see you."

Thompson looked up. He was feeling too comfortable to move, and besides, he was seven bucks behind. "Who is it?"

Blake shrugged. "Never saw him before. Claims he's from Fort Garrett—and wants to see you. Says it's important."

Lanny looked interested. "Want me to talk to him, Buck?"

Thompson shook his head. He knew what what his deputy was thinking. Fort Garrett was the Kid's town. "Deal me out a few hands," he said, tossing his cards down. "I'll be back."

He got up, unconsciously rubbing his big knuckles across his bristly chin. He was a tall man, stooping a little as he walked. Blake ducked out of the doorway and the sheriff followed him into the bigger room.

Business was slow in the Last Chance at this early afternoon hour. The man from Fort Garrett waited at the far end of the bar, close to the door. He turned quickly as the sheriff walked toward him, gulping his whiskey nervously.

The sheriff said: "You want to see me?"

The other nodded. He was a small, dumpy man in stiff white collar and town clothes. "Name's Telson Avery," he said ingratiatingly. "I work for Caulkins in Fort Garrett. I keep his books."

The sheriff took Avery's hand and dropped it. "Well?"

Avery indicated a corner table with his pale eyes. "Buy me a drink, Sheriff?"

"The egg-nog's on the house," Buck said sharply.

"Whiskey," Avery said "Plain and

straight. It sits better on my stomach."

Buck frowned. He called down the bar to Blake. "Set two up at that corner table, Tom."

Avery waited until they were well out of possible earshot of the customers footing the rail before he faced around. "I want a cut of the reward, Sheriff," he said. "You'll play square with me?"

"What are you talking about?" Buck asked roughly.

"The Kid!" Avery leaned across the table. His eyes were bright with excitement. "He's coming to Fort Garrett tonight. Riding in along the Texas trail."

The light in the clerk's pale eyes was understandable. The Kid, born Steve Elbrough, was the most notorious outlaw in Arizona Territory. He already had several killings to his record when he rode up the Pecos River and got embroiled in the Billings County cattle war. Riding for John Santley's Long Bar spread, he had led the group of gunmen who massacred eleven riders of the opposing faction in a bitter fight at Jake's Mill on Dawson's Creek. The aftermath of this still smouldered throughout the Territory.

If there had been excuses for his killings while riding for the Long Bar, there had been none to his later murders. The Kid had continued leading his raiders long after John Santley had been killed and his widow had fired him.

The Kid had laughed at the territorial governor's restraining order. With the passing months the rewards had piled up. There was now more than fifteen thousand dollars offered for his capture, and it was payable just as promptly for his body. A half dozen posses were still scouring the country for him and what was left of his outlaw crew.

Thompson said: "The Kid's in Mexico." He didn't believe it himself, but he gave voice to the prevailing opinion.

Avery pursed his lips. "That's what everybody thinks," he said. "But I heard Caulkins tell his brother. They didn't know I was in the back room. Caulkins used to ride with the Kid for the Long Bar. You know that. I heard them talk. The Kid's coming in for the big dance at Miguel Flores—"

Thompson shook his head. "It's too long a chance. To hell with it." He got up and

tossed a half dollar on the table, not trying to hide his contempt for the other. "The Kid would be crazy to show up in Fort Garrett tonight."

LANNY looked up as the sheriff settled in his chair. "What'd he want?"

"Some rumor the Kid was in the territory," Buck said absently.

Lanny grunted and bearded Al Havers said: "I'll bet my bottom dollar the Kid's strumming a guitar to some señorita down in Sonora. That's where I'd be right now if I was him."

Buck played through a couple of hands. He lost another dollar and tossed in his cards. He got up, stretched. "That's all for me," he said. "See you boys later. . . ."

Lanny, who knew the sheriff best, started to get up. "Stick around," Buck told him. "See if you can win my eight bucks back." He got into his sheepskin coat and hat and went out the rear door. Crossing the back yard to Chestnut street, he turned toward home.

A chill wind kicked up the fine snow along the street. It had been clear in the morning, but the sky was leaden now and he could feel the storm gathering over the Mogollons.

A hell of a night to have to kill a man, he thought.

He felt like saying to hell with his badge . . . to hell with the kind of law that asked a man to kill his friend. But even as he thought this he knew the word "friend" had a hollow sound, a ring as fake as that of a counterfeit dollar. He and the Kid had parted trails the afternoon they met on the trail outside Dawson, three years ago . . . a few months after John Santley's death.

"Hear you been asked to take a sheriffing job," the Kid had said, grinning.

Buck had shrugged, wondering what was behind the Kid's tone. He and the Kid had both ridden for the Long Bar. He reached in his pocket for his tobacco and the Kid held out his Bull Durham.

"We've been friends a long time," the Kid had said. "But if you ever come looking for me wearing a badge, make sure you come a-shooting."

They had parted that way, the Kid smiling, sharing his tobacco. But had ridden down into Dawson and accepted the sher-

iff's office. Since that day the Kid had avoided him. . . .

Buck's wife met him in the hallway of his 'dobe bungalow. He didn't take off his coat, and she knew something was calling him out.

"I dropped by to tell you I won't be home tonight," he said. "Lanny'll help you with the decorations."

She caught him by the arm and looked up into his face. They had been married ten years and he didn't have to say much for her to understand. She was a slim woman still, despite her two children—she stood tall and her body was firm and her shoulders square. She had been teaching school in St. Louis when he met her—she knew he was the man she wanted after their first meeting, and when he asked her she didn't hesitate. They came to Arizona right after the ceremony—she had never gone back. . . .

"Tonight?" she said. "It's Christmas eve. . . ."

He told her the truth. "I think the Kid's going to be in Fort Garrett tonight."

He saw the fear that came into her blue eyes. She had known the Kid in the old days when he rode for the Long Bar—more than once Buck had brought the Kid in for dinner. Mary had liked him, at first. The Kid had a dashing way about him, a sort of courtly bearing at odds with his reputation.

"What if you find him tonight?"

He read the question behind this . . . she was voicing what he often asked himself. What would happen if he did corner the Kid? There was no one in the Territory fast enough to match the Kid's guns. . . .

He evaded a direct reply. "It's what I'm getting paid for," he said. He looked past her, into the parlor. Marjorie was playing a piece on the piano—he could hear little Jimmy's excited voice from the kitchen. He had the desire to see his children before he left, but Mary would know how he felt then and he did not wish to worry her more.

"I'll be back in the morning," he said lightly. "It'll probably be a wild goose chase, anyway." He felt her fingers tighten on his arm, and he bent and kissed her. Her lips clung with a quiet desperation that shook him.

"Mary—Mary!" he chided softly. "I'll be back. We'll have our egg-nog together in the morning. . . ."

He turned and left her without looking back. He never looked back on anything. It was a sort of credo with him. It was what lay ahead that counted.

It was fifteen miles across the flats to Fort Garrett there on the Pecos. He followed a winding road along the creek. It was bitterly cold. The wind had free play across the flats . . . the country lay bare and white on either side and the Mogollons loomed up on his left, bleak and sombre against the lowering sky.

He felt a wetness against his cheeks. He rubbed his gloved palm across his blond bristle to bring back circulation. The hammer-headed dun he rode blew vapor streamers ahead of him.

Thompson knew what he would run up against in Fort Garrett. It was the Kid's town. Its citizens had openly sympathized with the Long Bar in the recent cattle war, and they had transferred that sympathy to the Kid after Santley's death. Most of Fort Garrett's inhabitants would lie to help the Kid, some would aid him actively, few would dare to inform on him. They were all afraid of him.

Only a man like Telson Avery . . . greedy for his cut of the reward.

Twilight came swiftly across the flats, and with it came the first wet flakes, whipping across the fading trail. Thompson hunched his face into his collar and let the dun pick its way through the gloom.

It was completely dark by the time the lights of Fort Garrett loomed up through the scudding snow. He swung the dun off the trail, quartering around the town huddled on the banks of the Pecos. When he came to the wagon road that came up from the south he crossed it and pulled up just off the rutted track, dismounting in the dubious shelter of mesquite fringing the frozen river.

He disliked leaving the animal exposed to the weather, but he could not risk riding into town. He had ridden with the Kid for the Long Bar, and too many men in Fort Garrett knew him by sight. Someone would be sure to recognize him and guess the reason for his being here, and the Kid would be informed of the fact long before he reached town.

Avery had said the Kid would come up the Texas trail. The Kid was a sentimentalist, and for this reason Buck had placed

credence in Avery's tale. If the Kid was still hiding out somewhere in the Mogollons this was the night he'd show up in Fort Garrett. The Kid would appreciate the drama of it. With a half dozen posses scouring all of Arizona and New Mexico for him, it would be like him to spend Christmas eve with his girl in Fort Garrett. . . .

The sheriff slid his rifle from its saddle scabbard, worked the lever and slid a shell into the breech. Dropping the Winchester across the crook of his right arm, he headed into the wind for the wagon road.

A squat hovel loomed up in the dark, its window throwing a dim square of yellow light across the frozen ruts. Its solitary bulk had a peculiar loneliness. The main cluster of Fort Garrett lay about two hundred yards beyond. Formerly an army post, the town had been taken over by valley citizens who moved in after the garrison was recalled. They took over the long adobe barracks and big two-decker building that had housed the officers. Saloons, gambling halls and other places of business had been added, their newer, frame structures built with their backs to the Pecos. Fully half the population of Fort Garrett was Mexican. . . . they had been there before the army, in the days when the cluster of adobes had been known as *Punta del Norte*—the northern point.

The wagon road made a crook to the left as it went past this adobe shack. The wind moaned coldly at the eaves. Thompson sought shelter in the lee side of the building, squatting with his back to the wall, staring down the valley.

The trail was frozen, the old ruts making dark ridges in the window light. The wind was driving the snow across the road, piling it up against the mesquite bushes.

The sheriff fumbled in his coat pocket for his tobacco, then discarded the notion. He couldn't risk a cigaret. He crouched in the darkness, cold and uncomfortable and grimly impatient.

Christmas eve! It was a hell of a way to spend it, waiting to kill a man he had once ridden herd with!

LESS THAN TEN minutes later he heard someone come up the road. He straightened swiftly, beating his right arm across his chest to whip up his circulation.

He stamped his feet to get feeling into them.

He knew remnants of the Kid's outlaw bunch were hiding out with him in the hills. It was quite possible one or more of them might accompany the Kid to town. It made the odds, already long on the Kid, just a little longer.

He shifted his rifle across his waist and slid his finger around the trigger as he walked to the corner of the adobe and peered up the road. He heard iron tires grate over stones, and relief and disappointment went through him in a curious mixture of emotion. His breath let out sharply, spuming vapor into the night.

The wagon clanked by, pulled by a pair of sturdy bays. A man and a woman sat hunched on the seat. Probably coming in to visit with friends, the sheriff thought, and the reflection cast up a mental picture of his own warm house and Mary fixing the Christmas tree, lighting the wax tapers, putting the finishing touches to the gifts they had bought for the children.

He ducked back out of the lash of the wind-driven snow, and paced to keep feeling in his feet. Snow swirled around the shack and began to drift under his boots—he trod a path in the loose-packed stuff.

Finally he got tired and hunkered down again, resting his back against the wall. It was pretty late. He judged time roughly, allowing for the monotony of waiting, and thought it might be ten o'clock. If the Kid was going to show up in Fort Garrett tonight, he should be along soon.

Snow drifted like a fluttering veil over Fort Garrett. Few people moved about. None came up the road toward him. Sometimes he caught snatches of merriment, the fading strains of music on the wind. . . .

Maybe the Kid *was* in Mexico, taking things easy. What did he have to go on, except a clerk's story? And his own hunch about the Kid?

He heard a horse at this moment, clumping down the road. An instinctive judge of sounds, Buck knew the animal was coming down the trail at a tied-in lope—there was a wariness in the ring of the animal's hoofs that at once tensed him and yet put a doubt in his mind.

The Kid was nobody's fool. But it was not like the Kid to ride up to an objective like a scared rabbit.

Well, he'd know in another minute. If

this was the Kid, he'd get the answer to the question that had bothered him from the moment he had accepted the authority of his badge.

He stepped out into the road, staying just behind the patch of light on the road, his rifle held ready in his hands. A vague figure loomed up in the darkness of the trail.

"Kid!" he challenged sharply.

The rider sawed back on his reins. His horse slipped in the ruts and nearly sat down. They were on the edge of the light splash from the adobe's window and the sheriff knew instantly this was not the Kid. He was too big in saddle, too heavy. . . .

He didn't want to make a mistake, didn't want to shoot an innocent man. He took a step forward.

"I'm Sheriff Thompson," he said bluntly. "Ride up so I can see—"

The rider's right hand dipped inside his mackinaw and the sheriff jumped aside, swiveling his rifle up for a quick shot. The other's Colt flared through the gloom.

Thompson's rifle cracked sharply as he recognized the rider as Pratt Harkness, one of the Kid's men. Harkness lurched as the sheriff's bullet tore into him.

From the darkness of the side of the road a Colt cut in heavily. A lucky shot creased Thompson's head. The stormy night seemed to flare up in a red blaze. When it got dark again he found himself on his hands and knees, his fingers clawing into snow. Vaguely, as from a distance, he heard the quick, staccato pound of hoofs as two riders turned back up the trail.

Nausea swept him, contracting his lean stomach in a quickly passing spasm. Grimly he turned toward the shack.

A long square of light fell across him. A short, graying Mexican loomed up in the doorway.

"*Madre de Dios!*" the man said as he saw the crawling, bloody-faced sheriff. He slammed the door shut before Thompson reached it. The sheriff pounded on the panels with his fist. His strength was going.

Christmas eve, he thought . . . and then, just before he lost consciousness, he felt the door open and he fell across the threshold.

HE HEARD someone jabber in frightened Spanish as he lay there. The blackness receded a little and now he felt the heavy pain in his head and the sticky

warmth of blood run down his left cheek.

He tried to get up, but his muscles wouldn't coordinate. He felt someone drag him into the house and the door closed, and for a long while he was grateful just to lie there in the warmth of the roaring fire in the smoky stone fireplace.

Finally a wrinkled, brown face appeared at his side. He felt the coolness of a wet cloth wipe the blood from his cheek. He turned and sat up.

The old Mexican was standing by the door. The woman turned and said something, and he moved reluctantly to a cupboard by the fireplace and took down a bottle. He poured some liquid into a cup and handed it to her.

She held the cup to Buck's lips and the sharp bite of tequila gagged him, but it cleared his head. He ran his fingers probingly along the edges of the bullet gash just above his left ear.

It had been a lucky shot, fired by a rider who had kept behind Harkness, to the deeper snow on the side of the road. If that rider was the Kid, then he had changed a lot since Buck knew him. More likely, the sheriff thought, it had been some other member of his bunch, risking a night in Fort Garrett.

The fact that two of his men had tried it might mean that Kid already had preceded them. . . or else the Kid was not coming to town at all.

The thought activated him. He got to his feet. The warmth seemed to have thawed out his long body, but the pain in his head made him wince.

The woman motioned him to a bench. He sat down and she bandaged his head. She was a quiet, ancient woman, emaciated and bent. Only her eyes, like tiny black beads, seemed alive in the wrinkled parchment of her face.

The man stood in the corner, watching . . . he looked as old as his wife, but he stood straighter, with a proud tilt to his head. Behind him a candle fluttered softly in its holder under a large crucifix.

"*Gracias*," the sheriff said when the woman finished. "*Muy gracias*." He reached in his pocket for money, but the woman drew back, shaking her head. The man came to him, holding out Buck's snow-wet Stetson. The sheriff took it and set it gingerly over his bandage.

The old couple watched him . . . there was a deep schism of age and of other interests between them. He walked to the door and the woman said in a strangely soft voice: "*Vaya con Dios, extranjero*."

He turned and smiled. "Merry Christmas, *amigos*."

The snow stung his face as he closed the door behind him. He bucked the wind up the road. He found his rifle where he had dropped it, and took it with him. His dun whinnied gratefully as he climbed into saddle and swung it out to the road.

There was a slim chance that the Kid was already in Fort Garrett. If he was he would be at Miguel Flores.

The Kid knew a lot of women, but Juanita Flores was the one he kept coming back to. A bouncy brunette, whose father owned the Flores Transportation Company, and much of Fort Garrett itself. The family of Flores had always been influential in this part of the Pecos River country.

The dun broke into a run as they headed down through the driving snow to Fort Garrett.

* * *

Miguel Flores' Place was a two-story building overlooking the river in the Mexican quarter. A two-decker veranda completely encircled the yellow adobe house.

The wind sifted snow through the oaks in front of the building.

The sheriff tied up in front of the house. Most of the gigs and buckboards and mounts of the merrymakers attending the Flores dance were quartered in the shelter of the adobe-walled yard.

Buck pulled his hat brim down over his eyes as he went up the steps. The door opened as he came up, and a man and a girl came out, the girl pulling up her collar with a gay squeal as the snow hit her. The man, a stocky, young Mexican looked at Buck without recognition.

They went past him, down the stairs, and Buck stepped inside a wide hall. A leathery-face servant stepped up to take his coat, but he shook his head. His gaze slid past the man, to a long table holding a huge punch bowl and presided over by an enormous, solemn-faced negress.

The dance was being held in a room to the right of the hallway. The sheriff walked to the table, ignoring the punch bowl. He felt he had no time for it—there was a

tightness down in the pit of his stomach.

Two men, with partners on their arms, came out into the hall. He stepped aside as they came by, loosening his sheepskin coat the better to get at his holstered Colt.

He heard one of the men suck in his breath, but he didn't look around. If the Kid was here, he'd know in another minute.

He heard a girl's high-pitched laughter as he turned into the wide room that had been cleared of all furniture for the night's entertainment. And then he saw the Kid.

He was dancing with Juanita. There was no mistaking the slim, graceful figure, the darkly handsome face framed by long sideburns. This was Steve Elbrough, known throughout Arizona as the Kid.

He was laughing when the sheriff saw him. The kid had a careless laughter that made a lot of women forget he was a ruthless killer—that made them want to run their fingers through his crisp, black hair.

Luck walked with the sheriff tonight. For the first time since he had known him, the Kid was not wearing his guns. . . .

The sheriff drew his Colt and pushed the man in front of him aside. The orchestra, consisting of two fiddlers and an accordionist, were just beyond. He shouldered his way by another couple, jerked the nearest fiddler around and said, quite distinctly: "That'll be all for the night, boys. Sorry."

The second violinist's bow wailed across the strings, and the accordion wheezed out a long sour note. The dancers stopped.

Thompson held his Colt ready. "All right, Kid!" he said sharply. "The dance's over!"

HIS GUN CLEARED a lane to the Kid as men and women edged away from its threat. The Kid had come up on his toes at his challenge, like a runner waiting for the starting signal. He made an instinctive gesture toward his hip, but his hand fell away before it reached it, and a smile crooked his full lips.

"Hello, Buck!" he said softly.

The sheriff stepped toward him, sliding his soles over the floor. His glance took in the hard, scowling faces along the walls, weighing the surprise here, judging how far some of these men would go for the Kid.

Juanita was tensed at the Kid's side, clinging to his left arm. She was a short, buxom girl of about twenty, but standing beside the Kid she looked tall and heavy and matronly. Her gown was long and cut very low. Walking toward them the sheriff saw her bosom heave. She was white around her painted lips.

"I'm glad it turned out this way," Buck said to the Kid. "I don't want to kill you."

The Kid shrugged. He was cool and unafraid. The sheriff saw him glance toward the hallway.

Miguel Flores, a paunchy man with a hard, direct stare, came into the room, pushing past the group at the door. He stopped when he saw Thompson, his chest



BLOOD IS THICKER THAN MUD

He ruled the Muddy Missouri, that ruthless killer-boss, chief of a thousand-and-one river-pirates and packet-pushers—and in his shattering grip he held all their lives—to crush. . . . Shan Malone knew he must free both the River and himself from that death-dealer, even if it meant blasting down gun-bought river-buccaneers one by one, in a desperate pistol-point payoff. . . .

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swelling under his worn *charro* jacket.

"This is an insult, Sheriff Thompson!" he said angrily. "You have no right breaking into my house—"

"You are harboring a man wanted by the law," the sheriff cut in brusquely. "I think you realize that, Don Miguel."

"A guest," the Mexican corrected him stiffly. "The Señor Kid is my guest tonight, Sheriff."

"Sorry," Buck said. "He *was* yore guest." His glance swung back to the Kid, stopping the slim killer's edging toward the far door. "Now he's the law's guest, Don Miguel."

Juanita swung toward her father, her voice rising shrilly. "Father—don't let him take him!"

Buck swung around. Men shifted uneasily, avoiding the direct challenge of his eyes. The Kid shrugged. "Sure," he said carelessly. "No use getting into trouble, Don Miguel. I'll go."

He walked toward the sheriff, lifting his hand up to his shirt pocket for the makings. "Smoke?" he asked pleasantly.

Buck shook his head. He watched the Kid roll his cigaret, lick it into shape. He felt impatience strain at his nerves. The Kid was taking this too calmly.

He made a motion with his Colt. "You first, Kid."

The Kid looked back at Juanita. He must have made up his mind then.

"Get a gun, Juanita!"

The sheriff stiffened. The utter boldness of the Kid's command, his absolute certainty that it would be obeyed, was like a slap in Buck's face. The Kid was precipitating a move that would force his hand. Either he would have to stop the girl forcibly, and thereby arouse the active intervention of her father and friends . . . or he would have to let her get away with it.

Juanita had started at the Kid's tone. She cast one long look at them, then she turned and ran for the door at the end of the room.

Buck thumbed back the hammer of his Colt. The Kid was smiling. He had the sheriff over a barrel and he was enjoying himself.

"Stop her, Miguel!" the sheriff said. He felt the thickness in his voice. "I'm the law here—remember that! But I'm not asking favors. I'm taking the Kid to Dawson tonight, where he'll stand a fair trial."

Miguel spread his hands in a helpless gesture. His daughter came out of the far room, carrying one of the Kid's guns. Her face was white and determined, and she held the bone-handled .45 in both hands. If the weight of it was more than she could manage with one.

"Stop her, Miguel!"

The elder Flores hesitated. Perhaps he knew the temper of his daughter, and the quality of the attraction that bound her to the Kid. He said weakly: "Juanita, Please, daughter!"

The Kid moved then, closing the remaining few feet between him and the girl.

Buck tilted his Colt. He had one clean chance to shoot before the Kid reached her . . . and nine men out of ten would have felt justified pulling the trigger. But in this moment he knew this was the way the Kid had said it would be—and this was what he had avoided for three years.

The Kid reached Juanita. He wrenched the Colt out of her hand, shoved her roughly away, and turned, firing under his arm. . . .

It was a clean miss.

The Kid's second shot blurred with his first. He was crouched and turned fully around now. His bullet smashed into Buck's side. He doubled over the shock, hardly conscious that he was firing. The impact of the Kid's slug started the pounding in his head again.

With heavy surprise he saw the Kid spin around and fall. He kept shooting until the hammer clicked on spent shells, and even then his fogged mind didn't register.

He roused with the third empty click and stared dully at his gun barrel. The noise went out of the room, like water through a drain. A thin blue-gray pall hung between him and the sprawled outlaw.

This was the way the Kid had wanted it, he thought.

Doctor Franklin's office was just up the street. He'd get himself fixed up there, he thought dully, before coming back for the Kid's body.

The little mission church down at the bend began to toll softly as he walked down the snow-packed stairs. The sound came up faintly through the howling storm, and all at once he felt a great peace.

He'd be home in the morning. Home with Mary and the children.

Ghost Towns Go West!

SHOSHONE JOHNNY crinkled his black eyes at the paper the white man held out for him to sign, cast another look at the new denim overalls he was being offered as inducement, and then crossed his X in the proper place.

So Johnny, a Death Valley Indian, signed away his claim which a few months later began to yield more than a million dollars a year for the Montgomery Shoshone Mining Company.

Climbing to the summit of a nearby hill on the back of his mule, Johnny looked back on the town, not yet one year old and already bursting apart at the seams. The confusion, the milling crowds, the sawing and hammering as building after building went up, were too much for Johnny, and without another look he headed for his home in Death Valley.

Six years later he returned to find the mining town deserted, the winds piling sand and tumbleweeds against the sagging doors.

Shoshone Johnny rubbed his leathery cheek with the back of his hand. He still wore the overalls the white man had given him.

Rhyolite, last of a family of ghost towns, was born in 1905, on the edge of the Amargosa Desert in Nye County, southern Nevada. It sprang into life as a brawling, lusty infant, matured during 1906 and was given a mortal blow in 1907 (the year of the Wall Street panic) from which it never recovered. It gave up its ghost in 1911.

Its conception, it is generally agreed, was the fault of Shorty Harris, whose name is needle-threaded through the annals of the Panamints, Death Valley and the Amargosa Desert.

Shorty Harris and his partner, E. L. Cross found a hunk of green rock resembling a bullfrog, shot through with virgin gold. Shorty went to Tonopah with Cross, where he sold his share of the Bullfrog Mine for \$800—a few years later Cross sold his for \$60,000. The section became known as the Bullfrog.

Two camps sprang up in 1904 as men rushed to the scene of the strike—the Bullfrog and the Amargosa. Between these two settlements was a place called Jumpertown, because the citizens who lived here were

constantly on the jump between the other two.

Things began booming so fast that the tent cities were no longer satisfactory. A real town site was laid out nearby and Rhyolite was born.

Two years after its birth it had a population of 12,000. A railroad (the Las Vegas and Tonopah connecting with the UP), crossed the desert in 1906 to make a junction with "the fastest growing town west of Chicago."

Flushed by the unending wealth that poured out of its hills, Rhyolite's citizens began to talk big. They built an elaborate railway station, levied a per capita tax and spent \$20,000 for a school building before they even had supplies and teachers to staff it. The John S. Cook bank building was erected at a cost of more than \$90,000.

The nouveau-rich imported pianos, silverware, and gave concerts. The section in which they lived was known as Nob Hill, after that in San Francisco. They made plans for an opera house—"the biggest west of the Mississippi!" boasted the paper.

Broadway and Amargosa Avenue were the centers of the city's night life—this section never went to bed. Entertainment palaces imported girls direct from San Francisco's Barbary Coast. Two of the leading gambling houses were the 66 and the Combination, featuring bartenders with the decorum of Old World butlers.

When the mines began to peter out and Eastern capital was withdrawn with unseemly haste, the citizens refused to believe that Rhyolite was doomed. How could a town with a \$20,000 school building, a railway station that was the finest in Nevada, and solid buildings like the Cook Bank be given up to the desert?

The Rhyolite Herald was among the first to read the writing on the wall. When it finally dismantled its presses, it was a significant admission that Rhyolite was dying. Within a year it was abandoned.

Today Rhyolite is owned by a Mr. Westmoreland, who obtained the town when it went into bankruptcy. Gambling being legal in Nevada, he still runs a gambling house in the old railway station. . . .

—DAVE SANDS

Brand Him Tinhorn!

Smashing Saga of the Northwest

By Michael Oblinger



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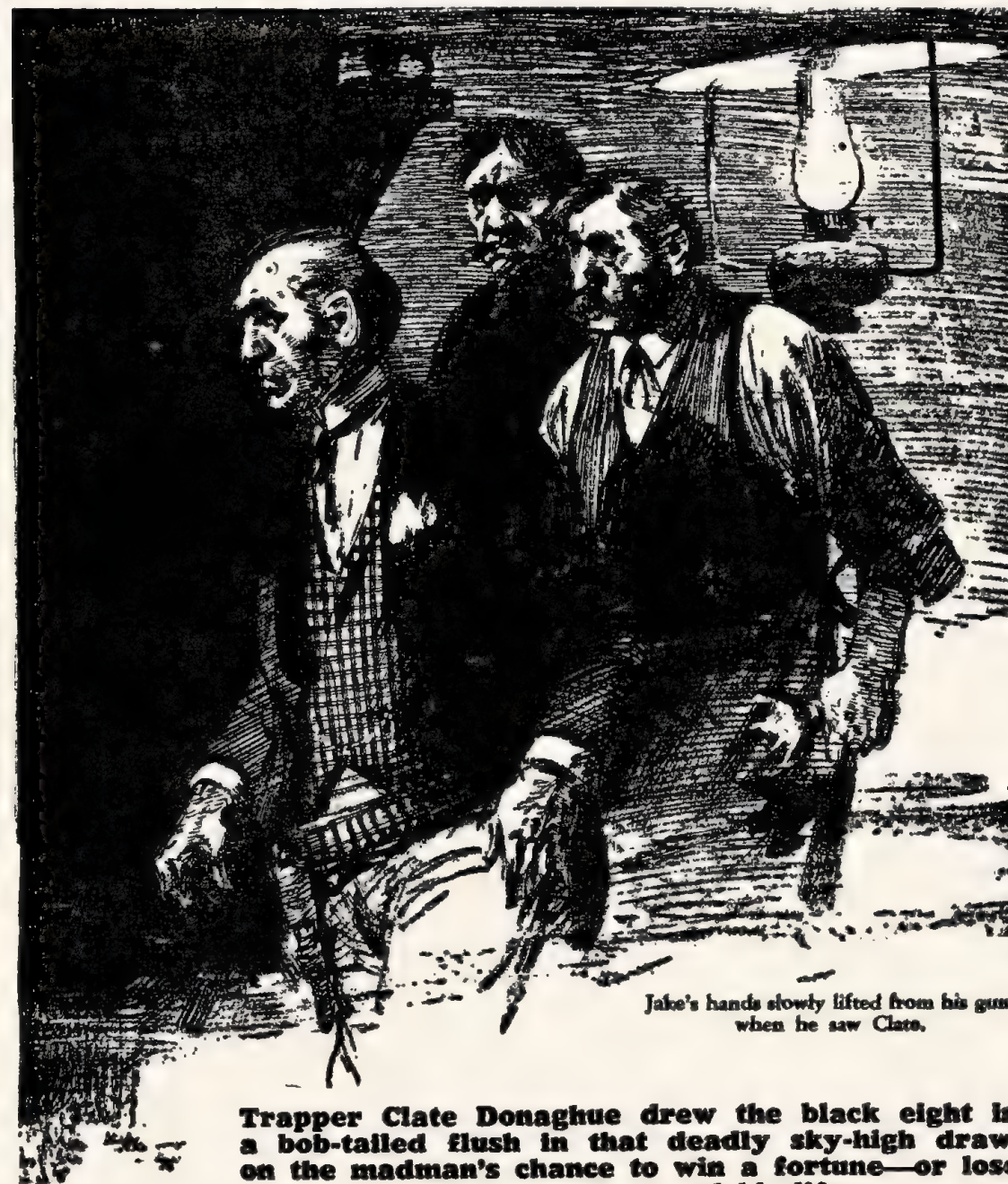


CHAPTER ONE

Cold Deck—Cold Corpse

TOBACCO smoke wreathed and twisted along the bar's slick top in the direction of the game room. Through a wide-open archway, Clate Donaghue saw baize-covered tables flooded with soft lights, around which were expressionless faces with

hard, intent eyes. Glasses on tables, fingers stroking backs of cards held close to the chest, attendants moving silently on cushioned feet, and the sound that had grown familiar, become almost a part of him—the music of chips. Poker chips.



Jake's hands slowly lifted from his guns when he saw Clate.

Trapper Clate Donaghue drew the black eight in a bob-tailed flush in that deadly sky-high draw, on the madman's chance to win a fortune—or lose both his partner and his life.

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Reluctantly, Clate turned his head away.

He said under his breath, "No, I have to think of Rock."

He removed his parka and stood bare-headed in the crowd. Tall and tough and lank, he saw himself in the bar mirror, and scowled back. Thick unruly hair topped him off. He had eyes that looked frosted, nose not quite in line, a mouth, full-lipped, that tucked at the corners. One would think, he thought, that behind that kind of a jib, behind that hard surface, there would be enough of the kind of stuff that holds a man steady, mushing along on his own true course.

But in his case, at least, looks were deceiving. He didn't want to admit it; frankly, he would rather not. Right now he would like to shut his ears, if he could, and only remember the other side of the picture—his present business and Rock's. Traplines over on Wanderer's Creek and a big catch for the first half of the season. He had the proceeds in his pocket. His and Rock Hart's. They were partners.

"Four thousand bucks!" he breathed proudly to himself.

That part was good. It was sane and honest and decent. Maybe come a little on the hard side, for a trapper's life is no cinch.

His eyes dropped from the mirror. Smoke, still curling along the bar, floated toward the archway. Three men came in, a man came out. The man who came out had an expression like a cat's with cream. He was licking his chops and, Clate saw, or thought he saw, repressed elation wanting to yell to the world the extent of his winnings. But, of course, a good poker player never did. A kind of jinx on that. The boaster always got nicked.

Clate gulped down the contents of his glass, edged over so that he could speak to the man. He had to. Something was pushing him.

"How's it going in there?" he asked, his voice thick with tension.

The winner stopped short, gave Clate a sharp, penetrating look, shrugged his shoulders.

"So-so," he said. "Tonight the boys are running all the jokers in. That ain't poker. You think?"

"No."

"The game is draw."

"I like draw."

The man, who was short and thick with bleached reddish hair and a dead-pan face, gave Clate a cold stare of pity.

"Give me stud," he said sharply. "Ever' time."

He passed Clate and pushed over to the bar. Whether intentionally or not, but certainly carelessly, he yanked out a stack of bills of cow-choking proportions and slapped it down in front of the fat-jowled bartender.

"Make it the rounds," he ordered. "Ever'body up."

Clate wouldn't drink with him. He'd better go back to the hotel, turn in, and get some sleep. That something was pushing him again. He had to fight it. On the calloused heels of his palms were tiny crescents cut in the flesh. He had to do that to keep his hands from shaking. It showed how deep in, how firmly rooted the old way was. Worse than wanting a drink. Worse than a fever.

Back in his mind, he saw Rock's steady eyes watching him. He could hear Rock's voice:

"You'll be okay. I don't worry a danged bit, Clate. You've got over it. I'll just run the lines till you come back with the money."

Up there on Wanderer's Creek, before Clate had headed for town with their mid-winter fur catch, Rock's assurance made sense. The faith in him seemed pretty well grounded. Good old Rock! He was like his name, staunch and steadfast. Carved out of a mountain, one might say, and scarcely exaggerate. If it hadn't been for Rock, who was good right down to the core, he might never have known what decency was, or self-respect or ambition.

He patted his pocket. "Four thousand bucks!"

His eyes stole back to the bar. Hangers-on flanked the winner on both sides, three man-lines deep. They were drinking to him, toasting him, giving him the old line. It was his moment of triumph. Seventh Heaven of a seventh son, the basking rays of Madam Luck—he had everything tonight—friends, money. He had everything.

Clate levelled out his palms and stared at the crescents.

I could sit in for an hour, he thought.

Could he? Sure, he could. Just as Rock had said, "You'll be okay." Anyway, it

was too early to turn in. Better not play, though—just stand around and watch.

CLATE strode into the game room, wondering why he was feeling sheepish, if not actually guilty. And it didn't help any when he looked back and saw a pair of square-rigged shoulders behind him. The Mountie, Sergeant Jim Leslie. Clate had barely a glimpse of the doughty face before an attendant passed between them. Then Clate grinned. Jim's unexpected appearance had a curious effect on the room, on everyone and everything in it. It was as if a door had sprung open letting in the Arctic's intense cold. Players stiffened.

The banker, Jake Ranford, who sat behind an ornate desk in a railed off enclosure, flipped a newspaper in front of him so that it lay flat over a pile of money. Then his left hand moved up, rubbing his close-shaved chin. The cigar in his mouth, dead ash at one end and mangled shreds at the other, tried to tilt upward at a confident angle. He was safe enough. But it had been a close call. The Mountie had to prove that money changed hands, that Ranford was selling chips and cashing them, taking his rake-off.

The dead ash splattered on Jake's immaculate blue silk shirt.

Clate smiled to himself, turning aside to watch a game in progress under the balcony. Here was the longest table in the room, eight players sitting in, and every one a professional.

Clate knew some of them, little Cal Brody, Jan Hooft, the one-eared Dutchman, Guy Pare, a French Canuck who had a hairy mole on his nose and a long knife in its leather case inside his open shirt. Then there was Mock Sanson, whose puckered lips and hooded lids gave his opponents no clues whatsoever, as he kept sweetening pots and raising bids. Mock was the best player in town. But one time Clate had cleaned him.

I wonder, Clate thought, could I do it again?

He felt the pulsebeats throbbing in his wrists as his excitement mounted. That game was hot, no lids, no limits. Tension was like tight rubber bands scoring the foreheads of every player. Hawklike, they watched each other. Abruptly, as Clate looked on, little Cal Brody, ready to deal,

hurled the whole pack of cards to the floor.

He turned, snarling, and spoke to the attendant: "Cards!"

A hand fell on Clate's shoulder and he almost jumped out of his skin.

"Thought I recognized you," the voice said.

Clate swung around. "Hello, Jim."

He tried to meet the Mountie's eyes, level with his, and blinked. In some ways, Sergeant Jim Leslie reminded him of Rock. There was the same basic hardness, the same off-hand easiness, the same out-shining honesty. Rugged, sure, and perhaps somewhat taciturn at times, but one sensed that underneath were the warm living cells of tolerance and humanity.

Clate said, "I wouldn't expect you here."

"Why not? Ranford's crooked and I'm going to get him."

"Not easy," Clate said.

"No, it isn't," the Mountie admitted.

"But one of these days—" He broke off and stared sharply at Clate.

Clate swallowed. "What's the matter?"

"I don't like that look in your eyes, Clate."

"No?"

"How's Rock?"

Clate flushed. "Fine," he said. "He's fine. Couldn't be anything else."

"I just wondered," the Mountie said. "And how are you, Clate? Still on the level?"

The words stung. "At least I mind my own business," Clate retorted.

Instantly, he regretted saying that. Dull spots of red glowed for an instant on Jim's high cheekbones, then his lips fashioned a grin.

"Okay, fellow. Well, I'll be seeing you. Off early in the morning on patrol."

"So-long," Clate muttered.

The excitement had gone out of him. In its place was resentment and bitterness. He thought, I can't take meddling. I didn't sit in. I was just standing here. What the hell, if I need a nurse, I'll hire one. He patted the pocket. Four thousand bucks, half of it his. Supposing he did sink a few hundred in poker? So what? It was an interesting game and put a guy on his metal. In tight, hard-fisted poker, as everybody knew, the weaklings fell out and only strong men stuck.

Clate left the game room, passed through

the bar and went outside. Near the entrance there was shadow. Abruptly, the shadow put out human fingers, touching his arm. Even before he heard the voice, he knew it was a girl. He could sense her through the contact, a small hand barely touching him. And he had another sense impression of a great fear in her.

"You'll pardon me—please. I'm looking for someone."

"Yes?" he said.

The street light found her face, a tense oval blur. She was pretty, he judged. Alone—scared.

"If I described him," she said, "would you recall whether he was inside?"

"I might."

"My father," she said. "Small man, dark suit, bow tie. He—he would be at one of the tables, I think."

"You mean in the game room?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, miss."

Her disappointment was so keen that it brought a sound in her throat and a droop to her shoulders. Hurriedly, she turned away.

"I'm positive," Clate said, "but if you wish, I'll go back in and check."

"No, thank you."

She turned toward the sweeping wind, a bundled figure in fur.

It was colder than billy-be-damned. Up along the snow-packed sidewalk, mounting drifts had white steamy ridges forming among the filled-in tracks of pedestrians. Street lights were dimmed by flying, sputtering white moths of snow. It wasn't the kind of a night for any nice girl to be out in, nor in such a roaring town where violence and death stalked the frozen darkness. Empire Portage, Northwest Territories' newest boomtown, might have daytime restrictions, but at night it clutched and crawled.

"You shouldn't come out without an escort," he told her. "Trust me to take you where you want to go."

"No!" She flung that at him fiercely, struggled on and disappeared.

Clate stood clanking his mouth like a horse with a hard, restraining bit. Devil take her, too! She was inviting trouble.

Three men plowed down the street from the opposite direction. Two of them staggered. The third one, walking behind,

turned away from them come over to Clate.

"Hi, pardner."

"Hi."

"Let's go in. I'll buy a drink."

"Not in that hole."

The stranger stood back and gave Clate the benefit of a careful scrutiny. He cocked his head far over to one side.

"You been to the North Star yet?"

"Never heard of it," Clate grunted.

"Jake Ranford's tony new dancehall," the stranger said. "Class. Only the best in the town go there."

"That's no recommendation."

"Come with me and they'll pass you."

Clate snarled, "Is that so!"

"Poker," the man continued. "an' high-class booze, soft music an' pretty dancing girls. Very exclusive place. The big money goes there."

Clate hesitated. The thing was pushing him. Poker—money goes there. He didn't feel any more resentment. No harm to drop around for a look-see before he holed in for the night.

"All right," he said to the stranger. "I'm Clate Donaghue."

"Sam Tuck. I work at the mine here."

Going down the street, Clate walked at Tuck's side. They wallowed over drifts and slogged through the hollows, moving fast to keep warm. As they came opposite Clate's hotel, Clate said:

"Wait in the lobby. I want to run up and change my shirt, fix up a little."

Ascending the narrow stairway, he was glad he had decided to take the precaution, just in case something happened, for he wouldn't want Rock to lose anything. Rock had to be protected. Even in a high-class joint like the North Star there would likely be the usual sprinkling of thugs, pickpockets and drink-dopers. Not that he had any fear, Clate assured himself, that he might lose Rock's money at poker.

He unlocked the door of his tiny room, paused to strike a match and went in. Stuffy. Smell of candle-drip, old tobacco and dust.

Clate threw his coat on the still-unmade bed, hurriedly changed his shirt, eyes searching for a spot where he could cache Rock's money. There was a chest of drawers, the lower one of which contained a pile of old newspapers. Quickly he removed the money from his coat, counted out Rock's share and thrust it in among the

piled up newspapers, closing the drawer. Locking up, he rejoined Tuck in the lobby.

"Okay, lead the way," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Tinhorn's Luck

JAKE RANFORD hadn't spared any expense in furnishing the North Star for Empire Portage's elite. It was strictly firstclass, even more pretentious than many of the Yukon's hide-aways or the so-called "clubs" on the outskirts of Dawson. It reminded Clate, for some reason, of a soft-throated woman in rustling silk, her lines smooth and voluptuous, her diamonds the glasses glinting on the bar and her veiled eyes shone from the covered lamps niched into the walls. Her voice, tempting and sly, came from the whirring wheels of roulette and the subdued clicking of poker chips.

Clate said to Tuck, "I feel kind of out-of-place here. What'll you drink?"

Tuck named his poison and they sat down at a table where a girl with a ribbon in her hair and soft challenge in her eye, came over and drawled:

"Name it, and you can have it, boys."

The glamour vanished for Clate. He said, "Scotch for Tuck and snake for me. We'll just drink by ourselves, I think."

While he spoke, he stared at the table's third chair and frowned.

Tuck objected. "The law here is you gotta drink an' dance with the ladies."

Clate placed a twenty dollar bill on the table, rose and said, "You do the drinking and dancing for me, Tuck. I guess I'll watch the play."

That something was pushing him. The sound of the chips was softer here than at Jake Ranford's other spot, the mushers' and miners' dive on main street. It was more inviting. There were more tables and more chips. There were more players with more money. There were thicker pads on the chairs, softer lights and more fragrant cigars.

The thing pushed Clate into an empty chair. He handed five hundred-dollar bills to a sleek-haired attendant.

"Reds, blues and whites," Clate said. "And a peep at the rules."

"Jokers out, that's all. Regular draw.

Everything's up to the players themselves as regards openers and such."

"Fine," Clate said.

There were four others sitting in. One mine owner, a bank president and a big fur trader, the attendant whispered to him. The unmentionable fourth man, doubtless, was a house man. Clate would have to watch him.

He looked up and smiled. "Let's go!" he said.

* * *

Clate started out like a mink in a hen-roost sucking blood. Then he let up a little, passed and checked, and studied his opponents. The bank president, Deems, played with strength and thoroughness, betting heavily on straights and flushes. The mine owner, Henry Toffer, bluffed and would ride a pair of deuces to death. The fur trader, Mark Hines, was smart and poker-minded but his face might as well have been made out of glass. One could look right into his brain. Harris, the fourth man against him, Clate quickly decided, was no professional at all, nor even a good amateur. He stuck to his place at the board, indecisive and fearful, under-playing good hands, over-playing bad ones.

Clate rose at the end of two hours and cashed in his chips for twelve thousand dollars. He'd come out of an inner mental sphere where suspense and tension blazed like suns. It was that he had wanted, the kick. Might as well admit it, maybe he could never live it down. He'd still be in there right now except for the fact that Hines and Harris had quit and a dancing girl had come to claim Deems. Toffer, taking too many shots on the side, was drunk.

Jake Ranford approached and laid a soft, squashy hand on Clate.

"Good going, Clate! Where the devil you been? Haven't seen you since you started running around with that guy Rock."

Clate didn't answer.

"Didn't you drop around earlier in the evening at my other spot?"

"Yes."

"Who tipped you on this?"

"Tuck, his name was."

"Well, stick around and enjoy yourself

until Mock Sanson comes in. We're going to fix up a special table in my office and jack-up the ceiling." Jake poked him playfully. "Just like old times."

Clate gulped. "Not for me," he said.

"You mean you'd cross up a friend!" Jake exclaimed testily. "Or, I might say, kick the cow you milked?"

"Exactly."

Jake Ranford turned, glaring, and walked off. Clate made his way outside, thankful for the cold and the stinging wind. It might bring him to his senses. He needed something elemental and basic like Rock. He had broken faith with Rock. Though he had won twelve thousand dollars, three times more than he and Rock had gained by struggle and perseverance in over four months on their traplines, somehow there wasn't any satisfaction in it. No lift. It was like money frisked from a corpse.

Back at his hotel room, he was preparing to bunk down for the night, when he heard steps in the hall, followed by a knock. Wondering who it might be, he turned the key and opened the door.

Sam Tuck came in, clanking, glowering, his cheeks flushed.

"What the hell you beat it for?" he demanded. "Look, I led you to a good thing. You cashed in heavy. You're stinking with the stuff."

"Well?"

"Not even so much as a thank you, huh?"

"I don't understand."

Tuck came over and pushed his face close to Clate's. The odor of high-class whiskey and the unmistakable tracings of a girl's perfume rose between them. It almost sickened Clate.

Tuck snarled, "You cheap son! Come on, split up!"

Clate was astounded. He took two steps back, which Tuck interpreted as a sign of weakness. Lurching forward, he grabbed Clate by the throat.

"Ten per cent, you dirty welcher. You wouldn't even have got in if I hadn't vouched for you. It was me that steered you there. An' what do I get—"

"This!" Clate said and let him have it.

He hadn't meant to hit so hard, left-right fast, one to the jaw and one to the belly. The jaw almost broke Clate's hand. The belly quaked and groaned. Tuck went back as if blown by terrific winds, his body

sagging. He went down, crashing, against the chest of drawers and lay there with wide-open eyes staring up at Clate. Staring, with whites showing more than the pupils, and blood dribbling from his mouth.

It was a nasty sight. Clate unclenched his fists and rubbed his neck where Tuck's fingers had bit in. He was seized with sudden panic. On Tuck's right temple there was a darkish mark that looked bad. A man could die from a blow like that. Bending down, he tried to find Tuck's pulse. All he found was the sound of fear in himself and the rocking conviction that what he had suspected must be true. And if what he suspected was true, this would be murder in the eyes of the Mountie.

Feeling strangled, Clate stole out into the hall, swiftly closing the door. He couldn't leave the body there. He couldn't afford to be mixed up in this. They'd think he was guilty. He hadn't been guilty of anything.

He went back into the room, walking like a man who had dead weights in his legs and blindness in his eyes. Sweat was pouring off him. Both candle and oil lamp flickered accusingly, as if they understood. In the room, the air was stale and dead tainted with the odor of whiskey and dust that had risen from the carpet when a heavy body fell.

Clate thought of Rock. If there was ever a time when he needed Rock close behind him it was now. Rock would advise him, keep him straight in his thinking, know exactly what to do.

Suddenly, Clate remembered the night clerk downstairs.

My God, he thought, I'll bet he saw Tuck come up here. And he'll remember seeing us together before.

But maybe he hadn't. Pretty busy at the desk tonight. The lobby had been crowded.

Then Clate had an idea. His mind was beginning to click. He could see a way around this: Carry the body down to the far end of the hall, at the back, open the window and chuck it out.

"Then no one will know what happened," he said. "Simple. I should have thought of that before. The snow is soft and thick and will muffle the sound when the body hits the ground. Might be the Mountie will think Tuck got in a fight in the alley, just behind the hotel."

HE CLOSED the window softly, a horrible load off his mind. He had more than an even chance now. In the morning, he'd check out right after breakfast and hit the trail—

Someone was coming up the stairs. Clate started back, saw he was too late to avoid being seen, and paused.

"Oh, it's you!" he said, in a relief. "Did you find your father?"

She didn't answer at first. He thought he detected a low shaking sob, but he couldn't be sure. Some girls cried way deep down in and it might be that she was that kind, one to hide her troubles. But she certainly was trembling.

"Isn't there something I can do?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I traced him as far as the North Star," she confessed. "Then I lost him. I don't know where he is."

"You and your father stop at this hotel?"

"Yes."

He wanted to reassure her. "He'll be all right. Please don't worry, miss."

There was that sound again.

"You won't worry, will you?" Clate insisted.

"You don't understand—"

"I'd like to try if you'll let me. Is your father in some kind of danger?"

"The danger is all in himself," she said.

Clate wasn't quite sure what she meant. "Just go to your room and try to get some sleep," he suggested. "Tomorrow morning, if he hasn't come in, I'll help you find him."

"Oh, thank you," she said.

She went to her room, closed the door and locked it. Clate spent the night among the stalking ghosts of the murdered and the damned. It was nightmare and wakefulness, starting up, lying down; hearing the wind rattling the window; hearing furtive steps in the hall, hearing voices. The voices were low and tense, "Cards." "Pass." "I'll double that." "Check." "See yuh."

And there was always the sound of chips in the background, solemnly clicking. Clate had never realized it before, but they had the dry, throaty rattle of death.

It was still dark when he was awakened by the day clerk, pounding and calling to him, "Donaghue, you there! Eight o'clock. There's a message."

Clate's first thought was of the girl. Her father hadn't returned. Hurriedly slipping

on some clothes and unlocking the door, he stepped out into the hall.

"Well?"

"Jake Ranford's down in the lobby," the clerk informed him. "Important, he says."

"It must be," Clate declared sarcastically.

He couldn't imagine what Jake wanted of him. He washed and finished dressing. He passed the girl's room slowly, proceeding toward the head of the stairs. Silence in there. Her father must have the room next to hers. Down in the lobby, he found Jake Ranford savagely mangling a cigar and spitting it out on the carpet.

"You sure took your time!" he snapped.

"What's the business?"

"We'll go to my office to talk."

"Why not here?"

"What I have to tell you," Jake said coldly, "is secret an' confidential. It's about Tuck."

"Tuck!"

"Yes, Tuck." Jake's tone was venomous. "Or maybe you'd like me to go to the Mountie instead."

Clate took a slow, deep breath, struggling for control. His weight came down on his heels. His heels sank into the carpet and became bolted to the floor. He knew that his cheeks were white to the roots of a two-day's beard. His poker face, always inscrutable and masklike, for the first time in all his life, he realized, was giving him away.

Without a word, he followed Jake out into the street, where white banners of frost crackled on the air. His and Jake's footsteps whined on the fallen snow. Though the wind had died during the night, there was still the impression of moving air caused by the winged-darts of sub-zero cold striking their bodies.

Jake turned in at his main street dive, stalking along ahead through the litter strewn the floor; past the bar where two shaky customers were mooching drinks; through the game room, reeking of stale tobacco that stunk like old cabbage.

By the time they had reached Jake's office, Clate was sick in body as well as mind. Jake lighted the lamp, then locked the door.

"What do you think you've got on me?" Clate asked, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Murder."

"What makes you think so?"

"Sit down," Jake said. "An' remember—you gotta play marbles with me. You killed Tuck. Tuck was my hired man. He said he was going to see you before he took the morning shift on Number two wheel. When he didn't show up, I sent Les Farness to fetch him. Farness walked up the alley, which is a short-cut to your hotel, an' I'll be danged if he didn't bump straight into Tuck, dead an' twisted in the snow. From the position of the body, it was easy to tell he was pushed out through the window above, on the second floor. Your floor, Donaghue. An' you was the one he had gone to see. You deny it?"

"No," Clate said.

"That's murder," Jake said.

"He struck his head on a chest of drawers," Clate confessed. "He attacked me. I hit him in self-defense."

"Got witnesses?"

"No."

"What chances you think you'd stand with a jury?"

"Not much," Clate admitted. "Sure, I'm in a jam. They'll probably get me. But what the hell do you want of me?"

Jake Ranford loosened his tie and stared hard at Clate. There was an expression of disgust on his face. "You don't know!" he said. "Me—with all I got at stake. Me—with my reputation an' the North Star just started up. My name would be dragged in, too. Tuck worked at the North Star. It's a high-class respectable club an' I got to keep it so. We'll have to cover."

Clate felt bewildered. "Cover?"

"God, can't you follow a straight line, or what's the matter with you?" Jake demanded. "Look here, we have the body. I took care of that. But we'll need a musher to slip out quiet tonight an' leave it in some off-trail spot fifty-sixty miles from town."

"Go on," Clate said hoarsely.

"I'll look after the details but you'll have to dig. Peel out. It's a fixer's job."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand."

Clate was staggered. "I haven't—" he began.

Jake cut in, snarling like a beast. "Then gimme what you have. It's either that, or the case goes to trial. I've sunk every cent I can lay my hands on in this new club." He paused, growling. "Yes or no?"

"No."

Jake stood up. "All right, you fool. Then

you better know that it's your neck."

Clate bowed his head. "I know," he whispered.

Jake came closer, put on hand on Clate's shoulder. His manner had changed. His voice was low:

"What about Rock? How'll he take it? You thought about him?"

It was all that Clate had been thinking. All he cared about. He was desperate, sick. Almost before he realized what he was doing, he had turned out his pockets and Jake was holding the money.

Then Clate stumbled out on the street.

ROCK HART shook off his huge fur mitts, the ones with the rabbitskin inners and gauntlet tops, hung his parka carefully on a hook in the wall, near the chest of drawers, and turned and grinned at Clate.

"I guess you didn't expect to see me," he said. "But an odd thing happened. I crossed Wanderer yesterday, scouting for moose and ran into fox. Off our lines between Red Cloud Lake and that low plateau where you shot the wapiti last summer. Well, the signs were thick. I sighted a blue and cross, brought down the blue, skinned it, and went on across a coulee. The tracks grew thicker. I could see right away we were missing a good bet, Clate. Easy to run another line up there and cash in heavy. But we need more traps. I thought if I could catch you before you left town, we'd stock up good and take those traps out with the other stuff on our load."

Rock paused. The grin spreading over the craglike face faded out as the observing eyes, closely studying Clate, abruptly came upon something that puzzled them. Two puckered wells deepened at the corners of his mouth.

"You okay? Feeling all right, Clate?"

"Sure, I am." Clate's laugh didn't carry conviction. But there was admiration in his voice: "You came all that way on foot, Rock—gosh! Twenty miles. You must have started sometime last night."

"Little after midnight," Rock admitted.

"Not a wink of sleep."

"Well, I caught me a nap just before I started," Rock said. "Dark and stormy, but I didn't mind the cold."

"No," Clate said. "Fifty below. You didn't mind it. Just like a jaunt in summer, huh?"

There was silence for a moment while they both sat down. Clate sat uneasily, a smother in his chest, each indrawn breath coming with effort like air forced through a blanket. Outwardly, no doubt, he appeared unflurried; acted natural enough—he had practiced control so long, it had become a habit—but inwardly, if Rock only knew, what turmoil, strain and guilt; what a tearing in his conscience.

He said, "Rock, we got a fine price for the fur. It came to four thousand dollars."

Rock glowed. "Fine!" he said.

Clate pushed his tongue against his teeth, sat up rigid in his chair. His gaze left Rock for a spot on the wall where building-paper, used as a substitute for wall-paper, had been torn somehow and the ragged end hung down.

"I hate to tell you, Rock," he said in a curious choked voice, "but that business came back on me. I didn't mean to. I guess maybe it was the couple drinks I took. But I don't want to make any excuses for myself. I'm wrong and I admit it. I played, and there it is."

"You lost our money!"

"I saved yours."

Rock quietly stroked his chin. "If you could stay away long enough, you would make it, I think."

"Rock, you're swell."

"Forget it."

"I hate to go back and just live off you."

"You'll earn your way. We'll have even more by spring," Rock said confidently.

Clate didn't answer. He couldn't. There was a welling up in him. God, was ever another man like Rock? Anywhere—any place? Rock was something that happened once in a lifetime. You felt it and it went deep and filled you with a kind of new strength.

ROCK quickly rose to his feet. "What do you say fella—fetch that money and let's go eat. I'm starved. Afterwards, we'll load the sled with the traps and grubstake. We'll deal with MacLaren at the Hudson's Bay. That's where you sold the fur, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Clate stepped past Rock, stooped in front of the chest of drawers and pulled open the lower one. His face went blank. This was the one. No, it must be the next one ~~and~~. He'd been in a hurry to rejoin Tuck

and probably hadn't noticed which one. A stack of old newspapers in there. He had tucked the bills in between them . . .

"R-Rock!" he babbled.

"Well?"

"It's gone!"

"What's gone?"

"Your—your money."

Clate straightened from the stooping position, turned, facing his partner. The world was stark and hideous with a nightmare reality too brutal for sense and too repugnant for thought. Yet he had the faculty of watching the effect upon another human being. He was seeing Rock, the trustful one, being shaken as he was shaken. He could tell by the outward and visible signs—veins swelling at the temples, the massive hard-cut jaws crushing together, the eyes darkening until the lights in them were jet. Pure jet. Flashing challenge and suspicion.

Then Rock spoke, "I wouldn't have minded if you had lost all of it and said so. But I hate a damn liar."

"Listen—Rock!"

Clate reeled back from the blow, a slap of Rock's open hand. He sat down on the bed, his impressions mixed, his mind tortured. Rock got his parka and paused at the door just long enough to turn, glare, and speak to him:

"I'm taking the team. That's all. Go back to your game, sucker!"

Clate lay back on the bed with his face toward the wall. Sucker. Go back to your game. I hate a damned liar.

That was one time I didn't deserve it, he thought. The money was there. I put it there. Stolen. But he'll never believe it.

He was on his own again. In this crooked town, among sharpers and shysters, he must take up the old life. In a sense, perhaps he had never left it. He was a gambler, born. And, being a gambler, he had gambled his own soul. He had staked dishonesty against honesty and had lost. Clean winds blew up there in the bush where Rock was going. There was peace up there, quiet—a life that tucked in tired but contented men at night.

He forgot about the girl completely until later when, scrubbed and shaved, he heard her voice in the hall. Someone was with her, possibly her father—but, whoever it was, they were arguing. And suddenly her voice went high. Too high. There was

pain and despair in it. He found her sitting at the top of the stairs clinging to the upright post supporting the banister. She was alone.

He said, "I'll help you to your room."

It was a pleasant room, much brighter than his, curtains at the windows and a cheap but gay little rug in front of the bed. Likely she had bought the curtains and the rug herself. For she had that home-look about her.

Supporting her, he placed a cushion in a chair. "Please sit here," he said. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

She sat and wouldn't raise her eyes. She kept pulling at her sleeves. Clate thought, she hasn't slept, she hasn't eaten and it's killing her.

"I could fetch you some tea, miss."

"No."

"You've got to snap out of this."

She lifted her chin, drew her breath sharply, defying him. "I wish you'd go. I don't need your help or anyone's. It's too late. I tell you, it's too late. He's going there now."

"Your father—where?"

"To tell Mr. Ranford. Ranford named his price and he'll get his price."

Clate wanted to shake her. "What price?"

"Me."

There was neither shame nor apology in her expression. It was still defiant.

"My father took money at the mine which he can't repay. I told you once his trouble was all in himself. He didn't mean to be dishonest. As a last resort, he went to Ranford." Her tone was very bitter. "In return for the money, Ranford—gets me."

"For God's sake, don't talk like that!"

"I don't care any more."

"At that price, your father isn't worth saving."

"He'll kill himself."

"How much did your father take?"

"Ten thousand."

"For poker at Jake's?"

"Yes."

"Damn that skunk!" Clate started for the door. "Look," he said, "don't give up yet. Might be I can turn up something."

He stopped at the desk to report the theft of the money from his room, then went to see MacLaren at the company's trading post. Afterwards, he saw Cal Brody,

Jan Hooft, the one-eared Dutchman and Mock Sanson.

Sanson said, "You're in chips. How come? Some of the boys saw you win at the North Star last night."

"I lost it later."

Sanson wouldn't believe him. "I got a roll," he sneered, "but you'll need a royal flush to shake it from me."

Clate slunk back toward his hotel at dusk, street lights sparkling through the frost. There was something in the smell of the air that reminded him of a snug little cabin far up in the hills, and the smoke from a clay chimney drifting off lazily into the encroaching bush, where coyotes were calling and the snow lay thick on the drooping branches of spruce and pine. And though he wanted to shut out the picture, he could see Rock sitting in front of an open fire, mending his snowshoes or greasing his 'pacs, and there would be coffee warming on the stove. . . .

"Go back to your game, pokershark."

To hell he would. He'd go to jail. Soon as Sergeant Jim Leslie returned from patrol tonight, he'd tell him the whole story. Let Ranford take what was coming to him. There would be no fixing, no corpse hauled secretly out of town.

I was a fool to give him that money, Clate thought. I can just picture Rock doing a thing like that.

Someone was waiting for him in his hotel room. He didn't see her at first, and started when he heard the rustle of her dress. His door had been locked. How had she got the key? What had happened?

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Hanson," he said. "Come to clean up. You're late. Why didn't you light the lamp? And listen—"

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Donaghue. You reported your loss at the desk. I'm an honest woman—"

Clate struck a match and lit the coal oil lamp.

"I didn't accuse you, Mrs. Hanson."

"No, you didn't." Mrs. Hanson was fat and slow and tired. Hair fell over her forehead and she kept pushing it back. "So I waited here to tell you. The office don't know yet. Soon as I found it, I came right up here. I was sure you'd be back before supper."

"What are you trying to tell me? You mean—"

"Yes. Here it is." Mrs. Hanson put the bills in Clate's hands. "I took out those papers but I didn't know what was in them and didn't look. They come in handy for lining shelves."

"God!" Clate said.

"I knew you'd be pleased." Mrs. Hanson pushed back her hair. "One time ten dollars fell out of my blouse and I never found it."

He gave her a ten, his last one, and explained to her the money she had just given him was Rock's, his partner's. Else he would make it more. Mrs. Hanson thanked him and left. Clate sat on the bed.

Jim Leslie can take charge of Rock's money, he thought. Jim will know what to tell him and I hope to hell Rock'll eat what he said.

He went downstairs for supper, returned and knocked at the girl's room. He'd learned from the clerk that her name was Doreen. Doreen Harris.

"No luck yet," he apologized, standing in the hall. "But there's one more chance. French Canuck gambler I know. Name's Guy Pare. If he's flush, I can have it. If not—"

Her face was drawn. She still tugged at her sleeves. "But why should you bother with me?"

"You're in trouble," he told her, "and I hate Jake's guts."

"Borrowed money must be paid back," she reminded him.

"I realize that. But it will give your father more time."

"The other way out is simpler," she said. "And Ranford will marry me."

She went back into the room, stalking like a sleepwalker. Clate closed the door quietly behind her and descended to the lobby, slipped on his parka and went out. He walked swiftly down the main street and out to the edge of town. Patrons of the North Star were beginning to file in, giving their names to the doorman who was checking the list.

He said to Clate, "You were with Tuck last night. I remember. It's okay."

A long storm-tunnel to another door, a second doorman, and he was in. Hooded lights, glinting bar. Waiters dressed in black. House girls wearing short clinging dresses and bright-colored glass necklaces to match. Small tables covered with gay tablecloths and on each one a vase with

artificial flowers. Last night Jake's new spot had reminded Clate of a voluptuous woman, but tonight she was an overdressed, worn-out hag. If one looked closely, he could see her stuffed bosom, fancy wig and shining store teeth. He hated the joint and every one and everything in it. Even the clicking and whirring from the game room jarred on him.

He thought, Soon as I finish the business with Guy Pare, I'll go and never come back. Not to this hole.

He had to wait for Pare. He sat at a table and bought one drink, nursing it along for an hour. He frowned at the girl presiding over his table and gave her a tip to run along and powder her nose again. Suddenly, he spotted Pare and hailed him. The gambler came over. He was a well-set-up man with a mole on his face and a scar on his chin. Usually he had a fixed, meaningless grin, baffling to his opponents at poker, but for some reason, he wasn't grinning tonight. Pare's jaw was as tightlocked as a sprung grizzly-bear trap. He stood behind the chair opposite Clate, ignoring the friendly request to sit down.

"Well, what you want?"

"Guy, I'm in trouble and—"

Pare didn't give him a chance to finish. "Sure. Sure. So me, too. But dees time I push a long t'in blade in dat soft, fat gut. He feex de roulette after I win at de cards. Tonight I catch heem."

"You haven't any money then?"

"Couple hunner, dat's all."

The heart went out of Clate. "It's a hell of a world," he said.

"But you win las' night."

"Jake took it later. It was cover for a dead man."

"You don' talk sense."

"You'll hear all about it tomorrow," Clate told him. "Now, for God's sake, beat it and let me think."

Pare left and Clate looked down at his hands. He looked at his empty glass. In his mind, he saw a girl stalking like a sleepwalker. He saw two blue eyes in which all hope was dead. He felt Rock's money in his pocket and started, then rose, hands spread flat on the table, staring toward the game room.

He could win again tonight. He had to. He must.

In the game room, one table had six

players seated and there was one empty chair. He would be the seventh and seven was his lucky number. He made his way over, fingering the roll and moistening his lips. His cheeks were burning. He could hear the poker chips—their dry, throaty rattle.

Clate pulled out the empty chair, started to sit down, hesitated, then turned bumping into an attendant, almost bowling him over.

I can't even do it for her, he thought. It's finished. I'll just have to go back and tell her so.

He was passing the bar on his way out, when a hand reached back and touched his arm. It was Guy Pare, and the gambler's lids twitched a signal to him. Clate went on toward the door, then stopped to fill his pipe. Pare joined him.

"Little bird peep in de bush," he said. "I hear somet'ing. Et ees crazy. A waiter carry a tray to go upstairs an' he stop at de bar an' whisper, 'One for de dead man.' You also speak of a dead man. Et make me ver' curious, Donaghue."

All of Clate's nerves tight-rope-walked on his skin.

"You said a waiter took up a tray!" he gasped.

"Yes."

"For a dead man?"

"Dat's what he say. Bartender pour out a double whiskey an' put on tray." Pare pointed. "Waiter go up dat stairs."

Clate said, "Keep your mouth shut and wait here. If I don't come down in ten minutes, go up after me. It's a frame, dirtier than roulette fixing. Can I depend on you?"

Pare patted the bulge under his shirt and nodded. Clate went over and started up the stairs. A man at the top started down, calling out to Clate, "Private quarters. No one allowed up here. Hey, you drunken fool, stop!"

Clate tried bluff. "I'm running an errand for Jake. Important. He said for you to come with me."

"You lie."

Clate put his hand in his pocket and brought out Rock's roll. "It's for Tuck," he said. "Jake's orders."

The guard stood aside. "All right, I'll go with you."

He mounted the stairs behind Clate and when they were on the upper landing, pushed something hard and cold into

Clate's back between the shoulderblades.

"You didn't fool me for one holy minute," he grunted. "But I wanted you up here alone. Just keep on walking."

They went to the end of a long hallway to an open door.

"Step in there!"

Clate stepped. The guard followed him in, struck over the head with the gun butt, backed out and locked the door. Clate came to in darkness. He sat up, wondering vaguely where he was, felt of the cold, hard floor—and remembered. Tuck wasn't dead and Ranford had known it from the beginning. Jake had got sore last night because he, Clate, wouldn't stake his winnings in another game—probably a fixed game—in the promoter's office. By sending Tuck out of town for a time, or giving him a few thousands and telling him to blow for good, would make that frame-up a beauty. I might never have found out, Clate thought, and I would have believed I was a killer, and the thing would have haunted me. But now—

He rose, wobbling, and took hold of the doorknob and shook it with all his strength. Abruptly, the noise he made was drowned in louder sounds outside. A body thumped against a wall. Clate heard a lusty French Canuck oath, a smothered groan, then a loud and terrified shriek.

For possibly fifteen seconds it was so still Clate could hear only the yammering of his heart and the pounding in his ears. Then footsteps, someone fumbling, the scraping of a key. The door opened.

"I stick de knife in dat one," Pare explained to him, "so I could get de key. Here—queek, the guard's gun. Someone else ees coming."

It was Jake coming. He had two waiters with him. Soft, flabby hands resting on Jake's belly, too frightened to draw, went slowly upward at sight of the gun and the knife, and the mess of a body sprawled on the floor.

He said, "What are you doing here, Donaghue?"

"No questions. Just lead us to Tuck."

Tuck was sitting up in bed when they entered, a tray on his lap and a fork in his hand. He dropped the fork and reached back toward his pillow. Almost there, the hand thought better of it and came around and picked up the fork again.

"Good idea," Clate said. "One more try

like that one and you'll really be dead."

Jake Ranford looked at Clate hopefully. "I admit it now, it was my mistake. I thought Tuck was dying, I really did. I got scared, I guess. I've sunk too much money in the North Star to have any murder trapper there and—"

"Yah, I know," Clate cut in. "You could never live it down."

Jake nodded. "That's true, I couldn't. You mebbe won't believe me, Clate, but I had planned to return that money to you tonight. I swear it. I have it here in my pocket all ready for you. Yes. And here it is, right here."

Jake leaned over the desk and opened a drawer. He came up with a bundle of bills wadded in his hand.

Clate watched him count it. Jake counted out twelve thousand for him and two thousand for Pare.

To Pare, he said, "That damn machine wasn't crooked. It just wasn't working right."

There was that fixed, meaningless grin on Pare's scarred face.

"Nex' time I stick to de poker," Pare said.

* * *

From the North Star Clate hurried directly to the hotel to check out. On his

way to pick up his stuff in the room, he knocked at Doreen's door. The round eyes and frightened face looked through the opening, a mere slit, but there was a manner about Clate, a difference about him, that quickly reassured her. The door opened wide. Now she could see how square his shoulders were and how firm and confident the expression on his face.

But she daren't hope, even yet.

He smiled. "The gods are good. And here is something you can remember them by."

She drew back. "Oh, but I mustn't. I—I can't. You're almost a stranger to me and—"

He followed her in. "Take it. Poker money. If you don't, I'll throw it in the street." He drew out the money and stood there with the bills in his hand.

"But you may need it yourself," she said, turning to him.

His eyes were shining. "Not where I'm going, Miss."

Wonderingly, she took the money and thanked him. For a moment, he stood in the doorway, a tall, straight figure. He had a good face, though a sort of rough face, and a resolute chin. But the eyes were eager—almost smoking with eagerness.

And she stood there, wondering where he was going. . . .



No Gun-Hand Lives Forever!

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White Buffalo Magic

BECAUSE a white buffalo was such a rarity, there was a belief, in most Indian tribes, that such animals were sacred. They believed that the Gods protected the possessors of a white buffalo hide; with such a hide hanging in the medicine lodge the tribe could make war without fear of any enemy, no matter how powerful, because enemy arrows would fall harmlessly to the ground and enemy bullets would merely melt in the air.

It was a white buffalo hide that caused one of the shortest, but bloodiest, fights between Indians and white men on record—the Battle of Dobe Walls.

The dobe walls were a mystery in themselves. Old and crumbling even when the Cheyennes and Kiowas discovered them, many years ago, it was never learned who had built them in the first place. They stood in the buffalo country, north of the Panhandle, in an area where the two tribes, friendly with each other, had been hunting buffaloes for a long, long time. When, finally, a white trader came along and, with an eye for business, used the old walls as a nucleus for a trading post, the trouble started. The Indians saw the buffalo herds dwindling before their eyes as the white hunter slaughtered the beasts, and determined to do something about it.

Besides the trader, himself, there were usually from twenty to thirty white men at the trading post, selling their hides and loading up with supplies. They were, of necessity, a brave and tough lot, well armed with Sharps buffalo guns. They easily beat off the first several Indian attacks against Dobe Walls. The redmen, suffering heavy losses, lost confidence in their ability to ever rout the white interlopers out of the territory. They were discouraged and unhappy at their lack of power against the fierce white men, and had no inclination for further battle. . . .

Early one morning, two young Cheyenne braves set out on a buffalo hunt. As they approached a great herd, Red Bird Voice, one of the braves, let out a startling whoop and pointed frantically, at the outskirts of the herd. His companion saw immediately what had caused the excitement in the other—there stood a pure white buffalo!

According to the established custom—as handed down by tribal legend—there were certain rules that had to be obeyed if the white hide was to remain sacred. The two young men followed the ritual to the letter. Red Bird Voice spit three times on the tip of his arrow before sending it into space. After the arrow had tipped the tough hide, it was permissible to use more practical ammunition on the animal; both Indians took several well-aimed shots with their rifles, being careful to hit the white buffalo only in the head. As the buffalo went down Red Bird Voice took up a vigil, while his companion galloped off to inform the tribe of the good fortune and to return to the scene with the medicine man and a virgin.

Nearly every member of the tribe was present to witness the ceremony. They watched the medicine man perform and intone a few incantations. He then handed the virgin a sharp knife. She deftly skinned the buffalo, single handed. She reverently carried the hide into the camp and into the medicine lodge. Here she cleaned it and stretched it out to dry, after treating it for preservation.

The redmen had so much faith in the power of the white buffalo robe that the first few waves rode, shouting and whooping, nearly up to the walls. The first barrage from the white men's guns mowed the leaders down like tenpins. Those in the rear were puzzled and shocked. How could this be? The white men's bullets were not melting, as per schedule. But the Indians kept coming, wave after wave, only to be shot down. The dobe walls, old as they were, were strong, and afforded the white traders a perfect little fortress.

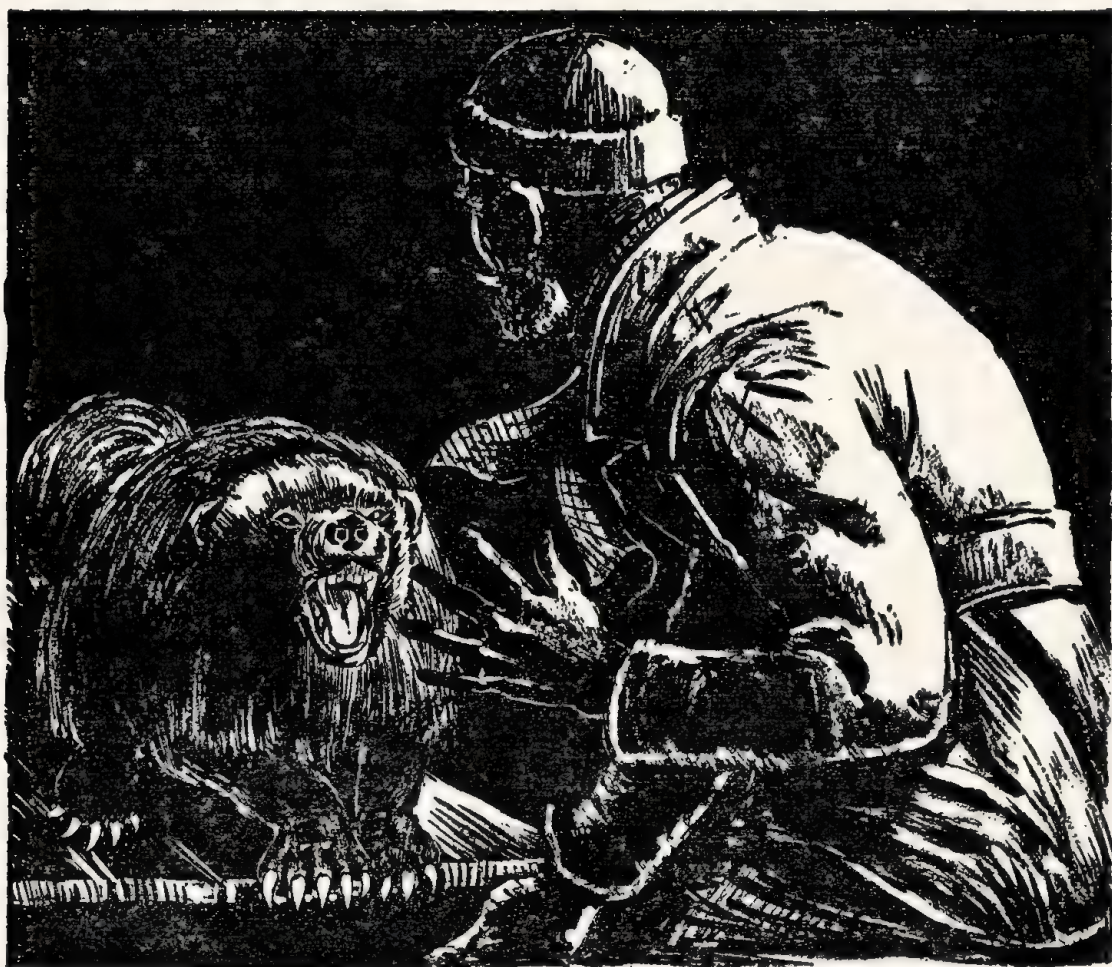
The battle lasted about six hours. When the last remnants of the red warriors had either died or run away, the white men came out of the walls to count up the score and gather a few scalps. They had only lost one man, and another had been slightly injured. The field was littered with dead Indians. They were lying among their dead horses, broken lances, and pitiful split buffalo hide shields. The white men counted over 150 dead redmen.

—JOHN T. LYNCH

WAR CRY OF THE WILDERNESS KING

By Harold F. Cruickshank

The frozen wastes echoed with the blood-curdling cry of Mr. Satan, king wolverine, as he battled that hunger-maddened wolf pack to the death, then, with killer-instinct still strong, turned to face the man who stood with his back to the wall.



Satan crouched low, ready to spring

EVEN WHEN TARAT, the wolverine king, clacked his jaws in pleasure, there was an ugly leer in his features—a grimace of the devil's design. In all the hinterland, Tarat could claim wild life honors for deviltry, and fighting ability. So they called him "Mr. Satan."

In the bitter cold of the sub-zero night, when the swamp tamaracs cracked like gunfire as the frost tortured their boles, Tarat shuffled along toward the habitat of the man creature. Recent heavy snows had cut off his usual food supply. So Tarat turned now to the man-trapped creatures—foxes, lynx

and other denizens of the great forest.

Tarat's nose wrinkled in anticipation as he circled the man's squat cabin at the edge of the densely timbered swamp. The scent of cached food reached the wily hunter and, caused him to give out deep-throated sounds of contentment.

Old Mr. Satan didn't know—and didn't care—that difference of opinion existed as to his ability to climb. . . . He swaggered in and from a cache several feet up a tree, Tarat dumped a quarter of frozen venison to the ground. With his great strength, Tarat transported it to his home area and bellied down to enjoy his first feast in two days.

He had patiently run the man's trapline, but had failed to find a single trapped creature. It was a time of temporary famine for all predators, for when the big snows came, all game life from moose to rabbits disappeared. But Tarat never starved for long. True, at times his belly grew lean, but where others failed, Mr. Satan found food.

* * *

No one knew this better than Cass Liscom, the trapper, who moved out of his cabin that morning to gasp in dismay at his empty meat cache platform. The weather had broken and Liscom was up early, having decided on a full run of his trapline to reset his traps.

He bent low to examine the tracks and a low throaty grumble rose to a bellowed barrage of oaths as he identified the tracks as Tarat's. A claw missing from the left hind paw was sufficient evidence. . . . Liscom straightened and shook a fist.

"If'n I never catch another fox; if'n I starve to death, I'll git you, Mister Satan! I'll—so help me—"

A whiskey-jack jay bird chattered from a nearby spruce limb and Liscom swung, snarling. The impudent chatter of the "Camp-robber" struck him like a sharp mockery. He picked up a chunk of stove wood and hurled it, but the bird fluttered deeper into the thicket, and safety. His chattering cries were like mocking laughter.

Liscom sucked in a long breath, and drew the back of a mittened hand across his whiskered mouth. He had suffered far too much by Tarat's depredations. Three times this season already he had lost handsome

silver-black foxes—pilfered from his traps by the wolverine.

Mumbling under his breath, he loaded an arm with stove wood and returned to the cabin whose split pole door he kicked inward. The door closed behind him, but did not latch, and again Liscom kicked it.

"Ain't got time to fix it now," he growled. "Allus somethin'. . . ."

As he ate a frugal breakfast of warmed over beans and bannock, he plotted the destruction of his enemy Tarat.

TARAT'S rest was rudely interrupted. Suddenly he sprang to all fours, and his piggy eyes began to flash as he churned up foam from his jaws.

Swiftly he broke from the windfalls to reach the site of his recent feast as a young male wolverine settled to the remaining venison.

Not for some time had another male of his kind ever ventured on Tarat's range or hunt trails—trails he adequately marked with warning signs.

Tarat uttered his howl of battle. The intruder, a big lean male, whirled, peeling back his lips as he gulped a piece of meat. He flicked his short tail in jerky movements, his striped fur bristled, and he moved his paws under him to pack the snow for a better footing.

Tarat stretched and struck, but the intruder was young, lithe and speedy. Though rocked back, his fangs managed to slash at Tarat's shoulder as Mr. Satan slashed by.

Snarling, Tarat whipped about. Blood flowed from the tear in his shoulder and the pain of this light wound aroused all his fighting savagery.

He rushed, ducked under the flashing forepaw talons of the young male and snapped with his jaws. The young one leaped backward and saved his jugular, but Tarat had a hide hold in a danger area. As the intruder sank to his haunches in the soft snow, Tarat, like lightning, released his original hold and snapped on a new one.

Gutturing curses which belched up from his belly, the big chieftain worried down with his fangs. His nose was well buried in the other's neck fur and the blood and other stench nullified his general sense of smell. Otherwise he would have tanged the dread scent of the man creature.

There was a terrific clap of thunder and the young wolverine sagged limply.

Tarat whirled clear, his jaw drooling blood. He glimpsed the man creature and like a shot, taking advantage of the cover the other wolverine's body offered, he streaked for the thicket edge. Another thunder clap sounded and Tarat felt something pluck at his fur. He buckled momentarily from shock, but was unhurt. . . . Shortly, he was deep in cover where he turned to listen to the booming voice sounds of the man creature.

Though happy enough at having destroyed one of his enemies, Cass Liscom was not by any means appeased. He had clean missed the very creature he hated above all others.

"Never git a chance like that ag'in in a hun'red years," he growled. "Cripes! That ol' heller is sure enough allied wit' the devil hisself."

Liscom unsheathed his skinning knife and pelted the wolverine. There was a certain satisfaction in this operation. Not that the pelt had great monetary value but it represented a saving of valuable fur-bearers and grub and equipment.

Suddenly a sharp light flashed in the trappers' mind. Discovery had come—discovery of a sure plan to outwit Tarat. He began to skin out the pelt now leaving more fat on the hide. He would use that fat, later, to smear the traps he intended for Tarat. He would mask his own scent with it.

He chuckled softly, with deep satisfaction.

"Okay, Mister Satan," he said thickly. "It won't be long now. Come on in an' git some more venison. I'll be killin' another buck soon an' I'll leave plenty around for you. . . ."

Slinging the pelt, he snowshoed on to his shack, feeling much better than he had all winter. The weather had cleared and the muledeer would again be moving down south in the aspen-studded hills and thickets.

By late dusk Cass Liscom was back at his cabin with a yearling buck. In the bush he had fashioned a travois-type handsled in order to tote the whole buck home. He wanted the offal as a special attraction for Tarat.

As he tossed a couple of thick steaks onto the snow to chill, he smiled widely and whistled a soft tune under his breath.

To Cass Liscom, Tarat, alias Mister

Satan, had become an obsession, which was a bad sign. It was a sign that Cass Liscom was falling victim to the loneliness of his hinterland isolation. Though it didn't occur to him, in his scheming to destroy Tarat, there was grave danger of becoming "bushed," which could lead to dangerous consequences. . . . Tarat was wise. His wisdom helped him, directed him in the outwitting of many creatures—human creatures as well as those of the wild range.

As he dipped his bannock in the succulent gravy of the fried steaks, the trapper whistled softly to himself, satisfied that from here on all would be well. He glanced up under his shaggy eyebrows at the striped wolverine pelt hanging on the log wall. The pelt was now stripped of its surplus fat which Cass had canned for future, special use.

Cass was weary. He figured that since Mr. Satan had recently fed well, there was no danger of another raid tonight. Tomorrow, before dusk, Cass would fix up baits and arrange his traps, each set smeared and camouflaged by the fat scent of wolverine.

Soon Liscom was shaking out his blankets, ready to turn in, while to the north, in the thickets, old Mr. Satan stretched himself and clacked his strong teeth as he lifted his nose to search a sharp south-easterly wind.

THE following morning, Cass Liscom droned an off-pitch version of an old frontier song as he lit a fire in his cook stove. In the cache there was plenty of food to tide him over.

Besides the venison there was on the platform, the buck's liver and on a shelf at the back of the stove a bag of onions. Young buck liver and onions was a feast for the gods, specially with fried bannock in the rich gravy.

His kettle on the hottest plate, Cass turned and moved outside, sucking in a sharp breath with a gasp. The first breaths of the sub-zero air had the same effect as a sudden fall through lake ice—sharp and breath-taking.

Cass mumbled, and then half chuckled as he turned to stride toward the cache. A whiskey-jack and his mate fluttered off, but Cass shook his fist good-naturedly this morning. There was no harm in the jacks feasting off the entrails.

Suddenly Cass halted, his lower jaw

sagged. On the ground near the offal mound was a mutilated quarter of the venison. A low groan escaped him.

Gone from the platform was the bulk of the meat, including the liver, the priceless, anticipated piece de resistance of the noon-day meal.

The trapper exploded into a rage of profanity. White showed at the corners of his mouth. He could smell the stench with which Tarat had fouled the meat he had not carried off. It was characteristic of Mr. Satan to render unfit for use by any other creature, such meat as he could not readily consume himself. Hence one of his nicknames, "skunk-bear. . . ." He was striped after the fashion of a skunk and had similar stench glands.

To Cass Liscom, this was the last straw in a season of persecution. He shook with agitation as he looked miserably down at the offal. Now he stooped, to pick up the part quarter of meat but hesitated. Cunning came to the warping mind of the bushed trapper. A leer spread Liscom's mouth. He would disturb nothing, but begin at once to make up his trap sets—

Later, back in his cabin, with another miserable breakfast facing him, he glanced through his trappers' manual looking for good bait mixtures. Finding one that suited, he soon was busy with the formula. From scraps of meat carefully taken from the quarter of venison he mixed the base of the bait, adding a small piece of pounded assafetida gum, a substance carrying a stench almost as vile as skunk spray yet an efficacious means of attracting many wild creatures.

Cass had smeared his mittens with wolverine fat. He smoked his traps and also smeared them with fat. He even rubbed wolverine fat into his shoepacks.

With great care he set his traps, testing their spring pans until satisfied that all was well. Then picking up his rifle he shuffled out along the south trail to hunt deer.

A little doe was the result, and Cass wisely brought the whole of the carcass indoors, hanging it on the wall of a small log annex in which his fur catch was hung. There would be no danger of it spoiling immediately for the temperature of the little hut was practically the same as outside.

He retired for the night muttering to himself. He was intensely weary from the

hunt. As he lay on his back, blinking up at the rafter poles of his sod roof, he thought of Tarat, and his lips moved, though no sound came.

TARAT was fairly well fed, but he had not earned the title of the hinterland's "glutton" easily. Whenever game animals moved and offered further food supply, Mr. Satan hunted with vigor. In so doing he used up a lot of fat energy and was always ready for a meal. Thus it was that when he tanged deer scent, he scuffled off along the trail and was soon up with a yearling buck which had strayed from the timber "yard" of its band, and now making heavy going in the soft, deep snow.

Tarat, for all his voracity, exercised great patience. There was no need for a quick kill, so he circled the glade in which the yearling was bayed with great care. Slowly, but surely, though, his circles tightened—closed in on the quivering fear-filled muledeer.

Soon the buck's knees gave under him and exhausted, he sank to the snow. The time had come for the kill and Mister Satan rushed in to rip out the jugular.

The blood was warm and pleasing. Tarat was taking his time, as he bellied down, to enjoy it when suddenly his short ears pricked forward. Out of the nearby wilds there sounded a ringing wolf cry. From other quarters the call was answered—answered by wolf pack members, hungry, starving creatures attracted by the scent of Tarat's kill.

Tarat sprang to his feet, snarling.

The wolf pack had gone terribly short of food in the recent period of heavy snows. Famished, they drove on down, coming to a sharp halt as they tanged the dread scent of wolverine. Yet the old leader, a huge, gaunt she-wolf, was not to be stopped. A fire of great hunger flashed in her eyes as she fanned her pack members about her to encircle Tarat. But Mr. Satan swaggered as he muttered his curses. He was afraid of no creature in the wilds.

When a young, too venturesome she-wolf rushed him, he coiled onto his back, and lashed out fiercely with his four sets of rowelling paw talons.

The rest of the wolf pack would have food now, but it would come from one of their own kind, the disemboweled victim of Tarat's talon batteries.

The old she-wolf leader rushed, snapped, and leaped back. This was a form of attack which baffled Tarat. He snarled and cursed, clacking his strong teeth. Soon he was being harassed from the rear and sharp fangs ripped out a thin strip of his back hide.

But he fought ferociously, counter attacking time and time again with claws and fangs, whipping, wheeling, coiling, lashing. . . . But he took punishment himself and in his great wisdom realized that the best he could hope for was to fight his way out of this death trap. He wounded two other members of the pack before he left, and before discreetly scurrying off, fouled the carcass of the deer, rendering it unfit for use by his enemies.

Snarling, chattering his foamy curses, he rushed to the cover of a thicket, leaving the pack their own fallen members for food.

* * *

In cover, Tarat rolled himself in the snow, packing his wounds with it. He growled continuously, worked into a fever pitch of hatred and anger and loathing for all creatures. One or two wolves he would have treated with disdain, but the whole pack had been too much for him.

While the pack roamed his range, they made it almost impossible for him to hunt successfully. He was obliged to give them a wide berth and thus his hunger intensified and when the wolverine is hungry, the sign is bad.

Tarat moved on toward the habitat of the man creature. At the approach to the shack he instinctively sensed danger. The sharp scents were inviting, causing him to drool as he stole craftily in on the frozen deer offal. Suddenly he sprang back, almost ripping a toe out by the roots, as a sharp metallic sound alarmed him. The steel jawed trap had sprung, but Tarat had been alert. He retreated to lick his wounded claw base, then bedded down to blink steadily, venomous eyes, at the home of the man creature.

At dawn, he quivered in every nerve fiber as he watched the man move out to examine the trap sets. He heard the man's chuckling voice sounds and with difficulty restrained an urge to snarl himself.

Now he watched the man move back to the cabin.

Cass Liscom was at last going out on his

trapline, satisfied that Mr. Satan had paid him a visit. In his excitement he slammed his door and whirled away, eager to be up on his line.

Up in the north gully country he found excellent fresh fox sign, and rubbed his mittened hands with glee as he went to work on the sets, touching the traps with a new bait, a seductively fragrant lure, sure now of a good percentage of take in spite of the pilfering of wolves or wolverine.

No one could have been more surprised than Liscom when, on the back trail home, he found a handsome silver-black fox threshing around in the first of his traps. A throaty chuckle of gloating escaped him as he rushed forward to dispatch the beautiful fur-bearer.

But a scowl clouded his face as he thought of Tarat.

"Here's one you don't git, Mister Satan," he mumbled. "I got your number now, an' before long, I'll git you. Just missed you by a hair last night. . . . No critter can spit in Cass Liscom's eye too long."

Chuckling, he shuffled on, his eyes flashing as he continued to think of the final act of Mr. Satan in the grim drama of their clash of wits.

AT THE moment, Tarat was weaving back and forth not far from the partly open door of the shack of the man creature. Through the aperture there came tantalizing scents. The scent of venison particularly appealed to Tarat who instinctively realized that the meat had hung for some time.

Searching wind, he blinked his eyes sharply and moved in closer. At every small sound he whirled, alertly, but, satisfied that no grave danger lurked about the cabin, he scuttled to the door, sniffed a moment then with a forepaw shoved the door open.

Leaping over the hewn log step, he suddenly whipped about as the door slammed at his back. In his frenzy of fear and anger he hurled his full weight against the door. It's catch clicked. Tarat was trapped!

In a mad fury Tarat whirled about the cabin seeking some avenue of escape, but in vain. He foamed at the mouth as he battered at equipment, spilling the rough kitchen table up on its side.

No greater fury could ever be demon-

strated than that which Tarat expended. He even lunged at the wolverine pelt hanging on the wall, tearing it to shreds.

Gone was his ravenous hunger, and not until he passed the peak of his madness did he bother to sniff at the inviting venison meat supply. He rushed to the annex, snatched the meat from its hangers and fouled it with all his venomous spite.

Tarat was faced with death, but valiant as always he elected to go out fighting, destroying, fouling. It was by these characteristics that he had survived along the wild hinterland trails even causing Mukwa, the big silvertip grizzly, to give him a wide berth.

Suddenly he froze. There was a sound of crunching snow out of doors. Tarat's fur bristled, but he controlled his impulses to snarl, or to rush blindly. Instead, he backed to crouch beside the stove as he heard the door swing in. Now he heard the deep-throated man-voices and his every nerve tingled.

In the half light, the man-creature stood transfixed. His kitchen table was overturned. He could not catch the strong fresh scent of live wolverine.

"Mister Satan! Damn you!" he yelled. Then suddenly he spun, and as he half turned he glimpsed the flashing eyes of his arch-enemy.

In blind fury, Cass Liscom struck with his gun barrel. Tarat leaped with a speed that belied his squat, awkward formation and as he cleared, he lashed out with a set of talons which ripped Liscom's mackinaw coat almost from his back, at the same time scoring an arm painfully. The rifle clattered from the man's hands.

Liscom rose quickly, booming a barrage of oaths, and reached for a block of stove wood. In his insane fury he forgot the great fighting power of Mr. Satan. Had he been thinking clearly, he would have stepped back and opened the door, but instead he rushed to attack.

Tarat whipped himself in behind the up-ended table, and there, crouched in the shadows, his strong jaws clacked, hideous noises escaping him.

Mouthing profane imprecations, Liscom kicked at the table and sprang back as the skunk bear leaped to rock him sharply against the door.

Tarat's fangs slashed. His eyes spilled

flame whose color changed from red to red-green as he bunched himself not three feet from the man-creature.

The man's left arm dripped blood, but the attack of the evil one seemed to have sobered Liscom's mind somewhat. Never in all his hinterland life had he been so close to the threat of death as now.

Slowly, carefully, he reached back to fumble for the door catch. At the click of the latch, the wolverine sprang. His fangs fastened in the torn mackinaw coat and only this saved Cass Liscom. The cloth gave, spilling Tarat on to his back and like a flash Liscom whipped open to the door.

For a long moment or so, Mr. Satan hunched, poised belligerently, as if uncertain as to his next move. His short limbs moved swiftly under his body and Liscom quivered, expecting every moment another terrible attack, but suddenly Tarat half whirled, to stretch. He cleared the broad step rushed on out of doors, cursing, and clacking as he drove for the nearest thicket.

Among the trees, in continued anger, he thrust his nose into a clump of willows and closed his jaw over a limb. He pulled and tugged, and lashed about in a frothy display of temper, venting his spleen on the inanimate things in a manner which would have easily exhausted a creature five times his size.

Calmed somewhat, he snuffled to rid his nostrils of the dread stench of the man creature. Whipping about, he shuffled on, growling as he passed close by the westerly end of the shack mouthing further defiance and challenge.

In the shack, Cass Liscom painfully set about making a fire, and heating water with which to cleanse his wounds. He had a lot of muss to clear up and he had leave his door open to air out the fouled cabin.

As he cleaned his wounds and splashed them with iodine, Cass concluded that he had come out of the fracas fortunately. His wounds were superficial, and they quite easily might have been serious.

He calculated that Tarat had, at last, actually fallen into a trap. It gave Cass a new hope. He would build a special den trap, a skilfully erected structure, well baited. He would exercise the greatest care and patience. . . . But meanwhile, he would continue along his traplines, taking what he could salvage while waiting, hoping for the grim killer of the hinterland to

make another mistake. "One day—the law of averages will swing to my favor," he told himself. "They'll turn ag'in you, Mister Satan. . . ."

IT SEEMED that the law of averages was due to turn "ag'in" Tarat. After his close brush with death, he had wisely held closely to the denser thickets, scarcely venturing out even to plunder the trapline. But his early dawn hunger prompted him to move out. His old boldness restored by his gnawing hunger.

He tanged a freshly killed cross fox in one of the man creature's sets. Here was ample food for his present needs. Muttering softly, he moved in, stopping and with great caution, every now and then, searching carefully for man or trap sign.

With infinite patience he circled the dead fox before at last rushing in to sink his fangs.

As his strong fangs ripped hide and then flesh, he guttured heavy snarls of contentment. But his belly was not even half filled when suddenly he whirled, snarling.

A single wolf shape was creeping in toward him. It was the big, lean gray form of the pack leader which Tarat had recently met and fought.

She came in alone, having deserted her pack. Many times Tarat's weight, and charged with the savage pangs of hunger which robbed her of much of her wisdom, she moved in steadily, her eyes flashing, lips peeled back to expose terrible fangs.

Suddenly she stretched. Tarat rolled back, coiling and like lightning lashed upward with his rowels. His off side rear set of talons struck and ripped and the she-wolf leaped back snarling.

Blood flowed from the claw wounds in her belly, but it only served to feed her fighting spirit. The strong tang of food almost wholly blinded her to the power of this striped fighter. Again she leaped and struck. This time her teeth caught Tarat by his throat hide. He shook himself savagely, but the wolf's greater weight served her now.

It seemed that Tarat's end had come. The wolf seemed determined, in spite of punishment, to retain her hold, sinking her heavy fangs deeper—deeper toward the jugular. . . .

But in all the wilds, there is no creature so capable of exercising so many different units of defense or attack. Tarat suddenly squirmed, seeming to revolve his body into an outside loop. He twisted his body in under the wolf, albeit she still retained the fang hold.

And now, Tarat was on his back. One set of claws only was free for service and he had little scope for maneuverability. All at once he struck upward, a short sharp blow. His talons sank and exerting all his terrific reserve for fighting power, he ripped backward. Even before the she-wolf could relinquish her fang hold, she was disemboweled.

Now on his feet, Tarat shook his head as if to clear it of a fog, then like lightning he went into further action. As the wounded wolf crawled toward the nearest thicket, Tarat struck, and soon his deadly fangs were buried into her throat. Savagely he shook his head and the wolf's windpipe and jugular exploded into two parts at the same moment.

His face hideous, splashed with blood, Tarat leaped back, snarling at the grim scene of the mutilated enemy quivering in the last death throes. . . .

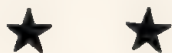
When Cass Liscom reached the fox set at dawn, he stood frozen at what he saw—the sign of Tarat's conquest.

Cass slowly shook his head, shrugging, making soft voice sounds.

"Mister Satan!" he breathed. Turning, he gave the battle area a wide berth as he shuffled on to examine the rest of his line. He would call at the set and rearrange the trap later, on his way home.

Not far away, deep in a wild fruit thicket, Tarat grunted contentedly. His wounds were plugged with snow and his belly was comfortably filled. His eyes blinked before closing at last in sleep. . . .

Come December. Come-a-ti-yi-yippy with .44 Western Magazine coming hell-for-leather across your corral with TEXANS DON'T RIDE OUT ALIVE. An action-packed saga of iron men and hot steel on a blood-red range of long ago, by Everett Webber. Also other fast-shooting novels and short stories by such top-hand tale-twisters as Ben Frank, Joseph Chadwick, Giff Cheshire and many others. Get your copy October 17th!



YANKEE GOLD

Branded a turncoat prodigal, Captain Wes Holbrook, late of the Union Army, knew his welcome back to that Texas cowtown wouldn't be celebrated by any happy feasting — unless he, himself, took the part of the fatted calf, ear-marked for bushwhack slaughter!

CHAPTER ONE

Traitor's Return

HE WAS terribly weary when he saw the town. Weeks in the saddle had put a sag in his broad shoulders, and a tired slump in his lean body. Dust of half a dozen states was ground into the uniform he wore, so at first glance it was hard to say whether it was the grey of the South, or the blue of the North.

And there was Salidan. Wes Holbrooke reined in on a hilltop and looked down at the town of his birth. The hot Texas sun beat down on the collection of dobe and false fronted buildings. A buggy moved through the streets, raising a cloud of thick yellow dust.

Salidan looked old and tired to Wes. It looked, he thought, a lot like he felt; sick of war, and yet, too tired and weary to shake off the memories of the past four years and get down to the business of peace.

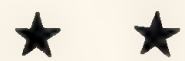
The Texas sun was mighty hot, after four years of campaigning in Maryland, Pennsylvania and northern Virginia. He cuffed back his hat and wiped sweat from his forehead. He lifted the reins and his mount started forward.

"Just a couple more miles, old hoss, and we're home," he said aloud to his mount.

Home. It sounded funny, and it brought memories crowding back; pressing around him. In the more than four years he'd been away, he'd never received any news from home. Once or twice he'd thought of trying to sneak a letter through the enemy



Wes smashed him with a crushing blow.



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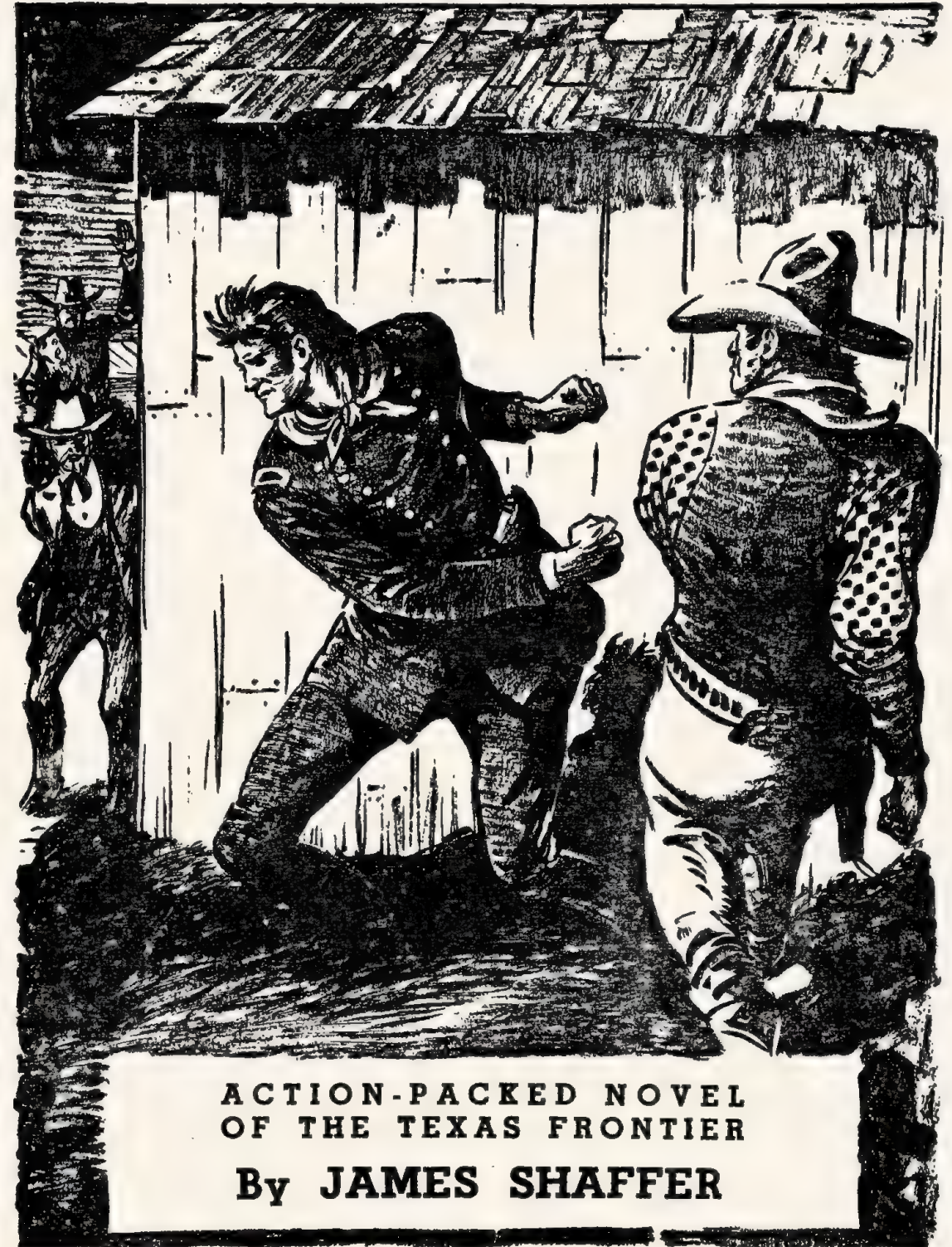
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OF THE TEXAS FRONTIER**

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lines to let his dad know that he was all right.

But that would have been risky business. In the four years he'd fought in the Union army, he'd never been able to shake off those quick glances of suspicion that his southern drawl always brought. And if he'd been caught trying to mail a letter home—it would have been hard to explain.

The memories crowded closer as his tired mare scuffed through the dust of the main street. Here were all the scenes he'd known since boyhood. There was Mel Banks' General Store, with its hodge-podge display in the two big windows; its wooden awning over the sidewalk and the old men sitting on the benches under it, whittling.

There was the Lone Star Hotel, with its wide veranda cluttered with cane-bottom rocking chairs. The wide gaping doors of Smith's Livery exuded its healthy odor of horse flesh, hay and leather onto the street. There was the bank, the dentist's office, the barber shop, and all the rest. He turned in at the livery and swung to the ground. Asa Smith came out of his office on bowed, scrawny legs, his goattee bobbing as he worked his cud of eating tobacco. He forgot to chew at the sight of Wes.

"Wes Holbrooke!" he gasped. "Back in town big as life—and wearing that—uniform! Why, I never expected to see *you* again . . ."

Wes nodded, Asa's last words wiping the smile off his face and replacing it with a scowl. He was remembering the way he'd left town. With a gun—half a dozen guns—in his back.

"THE SHERIFF says we can't shoot **I** you!" Booger Laird's booming voice still rang in his ears. "Says it would be murder—but I don't see that it would be murder to shoot a damn turncoat—a damn Yankee-loving polecat!"

"I still think we'd ought to use the tar and feathers!" Guthrie Laird butted in. Laird was trying hard to be a carbon copy of his old man. He wasn't yet as big as Booger, nor could he bluster as loud. But he was fast developing Booger's swagger and sneer, and he had been born with Booger's streak of cruelty.

"I told you I wouldn't stand for it," the sheriff had yelled. "Not while I hold this scattergun!"

It had been a strange procession up the middle of Salidan's street. There was Booger Laird and his son, Guthrie. Siding them were half a dozen of their friends and cronies. They held guns on Wes, as they marched him out of town. Following the procession on the sidewalk was Sheriff Matt Perkins, a dead cigar clamped in his teeth, a shotgun cradle in his arms. And following the sheriff was Ollie Myers.

Ollie and Wes had grown up together. They'd played hookey from school together, had gotten their first ponies at the same time, and had both been thrown the same day from a bucking horse they'd tried to ride. Wes had been the serious one of the two; always thoughtful, always slow to anger; always cautious.

Ollie was the reckless one. He plunged into danger with no thought of the outcome. Ollie had a pleasant laugh, and it came easily. Where Wes' eyes were always serious, there was a merry twinkle in Ollie's eyes, and a ready laugh on his lips. Ollie had sided Sheriff Perkins on that queer march through town.

"I think you're a fool to fight for the North," Ollie had said, "but I ain't trying to stop you." Then he'd laughed. "And when we whup them damyankees, I'm gonna take Abe Lincoln's galluses off and strop you with 'em!"

But Ollie had sided the sheriff on that march through town. And the grin on his face didn't fool the Lairds. They knew Ollie didn't wear that gun of his for an ornament. He didn't approve of Wes going off to fight for the Yankees, but he'd see that Wes got the chance.

And that, Wes thought bitterly was more than his own father and brother had done. Old Lige Holbrooke and his younger son, Dave, had stood on the porch of the Lone Star Hotel and watched that queer parade. Old Lige had stood and watched his mortal enemies, the Lairds, chase his oldest son out of town. And he'd never made a move toward the big Colt that had made the Lairds tread softly all these years.

And Lige had ordered Dave not to interfere. Not that Dave would have interfered. Not that Dave would have lifted a hand; because Dave was already getting his commission as lieutenant in the Confederate cavalry.

There'd been others that had watched

the parade. Gretchen Shumate and her father had sat in a buggy in front of the bank and watched it. And Gretchen had turned her head as Wes had come abreast the buggy. She had stared straight ahead, chin high. Henry Shumate had damned himself in the eyes of the whole town. He'd leaned out of the buggy.

"Good luck, Wes! Hope to see you when this damn foolishness is all over!"

Wes had heard Gretchen's angry voice scolding her father, had heard her father's rumbling reply, as he damned the politicians that had started the war. And then he passed out of earshot.

"GIVE my hoss the best," Wes told Asa. "Rubdown, grain—the works."

He strode toward the Owl Saloon. Four years—and more. The roots of hate can wither and die in four years. Or they can reach deeper, and the wicked plant can grow stronger, and its fruit more bitter. He wondered. . .

The interior of the Owl was dim and cool, and the same old smells of liquor, damp sawdust and tobacco smoke were still there. Herb Dulaney was at his eternal task of polishing glasses. The batwing doors squeaked as they had always done, and Herb looked up.

"Well, I'll—be—damned!"

"Hello, Herb," Wes took off his blue campaign hat and laid it on the bar. The Owl was deserted, save for old Tank Yearth, who snoozed off a drunk in the corner. "The coldest beer you got, Herb."

The bartender's hands moved mechanically to pick up a mug and put it under the beer tap. His eyes never left Wes.

"What're you doing back?" he asked.

"This is my home," Wes told him coldly. "I went away to fight the war. It's over and I'm back home. It's as simple as that."

"Not quite as simple," a voice said, to the accompaniment of the squeaking doors. Wes looked around. Ollie Myers stood just inside the Owl, feet spread apart, slim thumbs hooked in the wide holster belt around his middle.

"Ollie!" Wes ejaculated. He lifted his mug. "Damn, its good to see you, come have one with me."

Ollie came across the floor, walking on the balls of his feet with that quick, lithe stride of his. Here was Ollie Myers, the

same Ollie with the same grin. Then Wes checked himself. The grin was still on Ollie's face but something had happened to it.

It wasn't the same boyish, devil-may-care grin Wes had known. It was cold and fixed and hard now. And there was no twinkle in Ollie's eyes to back it up; to make that grin real. There was a thin ragged scar down his cheek. It hadn't been there before. Wes wondered about that, then noticed that Ollie's pants were gray; Confederate gray. He wondered if he and Ollie had been on the same battlefields.

Then he shrugged the thoughts away and turned to Herb.

"One for Ollie," he said, and Herb reached for a mug. Ollie's voice stopped him. Ollie's voice, low, chill and flat.

"I'm particular who I drink with, Herb." The bartender sighed and replaced the mug. Then he placed a whiskey bottle and shot glass on the bar. Ollie laid down some silver. Laid it down with a loud clank, to call attention that he was paying for his own drink.

"So it's like that?" Wes' voice was almost a whisper.

Ollie waited until he'd downed the second drink before replying. "It's like that." A long pause. "What brings you here?"

"Maybe," Wes said slowly, "that's none of your business."

Ollie nodded. "Okay, so your coming back is none of my business. But your riding on—that's my business."

Wes started to laugh, then checked himself. "Are you trying to give me my walking papers?"

"Not trying!" There was a quality in Ollie's voice that had not been there four years ago. A ragged quality that bitterness for a lost cause had put there. "I'm not trying to give you your walking papers—I'm *doing* it!"

The ugliness within the man was like a coiled rattler, ready to strike. Wes waited, thankful that his beer mug was in his left hand. Even so, he thought, he still wore an Army holster, with a button flap. And Ollie was fast. But the moment passed as Ollie casually picked up his whiskey glass in his right hand.

"Ride on, Wes. Ride on out of Salidan," he said in a casual tone. "You've no home here any longer. There's no home for you south of the Mason-Dixon line."

He placed his glass carefully on the bar and faced Wes squarely. The grin was still on his face, but his eyes were hard as agate; cold as ice.

"Adios, *Captain Holbrooke*."

WES watched him walk out. It wasn't the easy-going gait of old. Ollie's back was straight as a ramrod. And Wes thought: Pride is a terrible thing. They've lost the war, and in losing it, they've gained something more deadly than poison. They've gained pride, because they think that's all they have left.

And as long as they cling to that stubborn pride, they haven't a prayer of a chance to rebuild Texas.

"It didn't take long," Herb said, as if speaking to himself. "You ain't in town five minutes, and you've got your orders."

"Five minutes to give me my orders," Wes said, "But a damned sight longer before they're carried out!"

He finished his beer and drew out a gold piece. Herb's face turned red at the sight of the money. He fumbled in his cash drawer for change, and Wes saw his embarrassment change to anger; and saw the same stubborn pride build up in his eyes. And he suddenly knew why.

There wasn't any money in that till. If there was, it was probably Confederate currency; as worthless as the paper it was printed on.

"Hold the change for me, Herb. I'll pick it up later—or drink it up."

Out on the street, he was aware of a change in the atmosphere. It hadn't been there when he'd ridden in. The town had been dozing in the hot midday sun. The lethargy was gone, and he could almost feel the town's hostility pressing against him. Half the chairs on the hotel veranda were filled now. Men lounged in doorways, or stood on the sidewalks eyeing him with open hostility. He let his gaze range over them.

He knew them all, but there wasn't a voice lifted in greeting, nor a head nodded in his direction. He shrugged and started for the hotel. And then strident voices reached his ears.

"Go for your gun, damn yuh! I been honing to let daylight through that big belly of yours for years—!"

That voice! There could be no mistake.

It would take longer than four years to wipe out the memory of his own father's voice. Wes turned and hurried in that direction. The other side of the livery was an open lot, with a couple of shade trees. There were stobs in the ground to pitch horseshoes, but there was no one pitching now.

A small knot of men were gathered around Lige Holbrooke and Booger Laird. Lige Holbrooke looked like a bantam rooster against the bulk of Booger. His hand clawed over the butt of his gun, and there was a grin that was a little too sick to be carefree, on Booger's face.

"Yuh been crowding me ever since I knowed my boy wasn't coming home from the war," Lige Holbrooke yelled. "Crowding me because you knowed I was an old man, alone in the world. But you didn't expect a gun showdown without the hired gunwhelps of yours to back you, did you, Booger?? Well, I'm sick and tired of your crowding. This is between you'n me—"

Wes pushed through the growing crowd. The crowd resisted at first, then some turned to see who it was. They recognized him then, and a lane opened as if by magic.

"How about dealing me a hand in this, dad?" Wes said quietly, stepping alongside Lige. Booger Laird's eyes narrowed at the sight of Wes, but there was no surprise. Just hate. Booger had heard, evidently, that he was in town.

"I seem to owe Booger something myself—" Wes was saying, when old Lige turned.

"Stranger, stay out of my fight!" Lige ripped out. "It ain't healthy for a stranger to mix into something that's none of his business!"

The words brought a shocked silence for a moment, then the crowd buzzed into mumbling talk. Wes was aware that he was staring at his dad, unable to believe his own ears. After one angry look at his own son, Lige Holbrooke had turned back to face Booger. Wes opened his mouth to speak, but Booger Laird beat him to it.

"Seems that this ain't your argument," Booger boomed with a laugh, and then added with a sneer, "stranger!"

Wes lunged. His fist curved in a short hook, sinking deep into the flabby guts of Booger Laird. The big pot-gutted rancher squawled in pain and staggered backwards.

Booger stood an inch and a half taller than Wes and must have outweighed him thirty pounds, but most of it was plain blubber. He gagged as the pain of Wes' blow ran through his body, and then his big hand snaked for his gun.

But Wes didn't give him a chance to draw it. He was on him in an instant, chopping the side of his hand down on the man's wrist. The gun thudded into the dust. Booger back pedaled trying to stay away from Wes' fist.

"Guthrie! Guthrie!" Booger drawled. "Come a-running. . ."

Wes bored in, trying to land a solid punch on the man's fat jowls, but Booger was too good at covering up. Then he heard, with part of his mind, Guthrie's loud hail.

"Comin' Paw!" Feet thudded into the vacant lot, then Guthrie was bawling at the crowd to let him through.

"Turn around, Wes, and get your need-in's!" Guthrie bawled. "Pick on a man your own age! By rights, I oughta gun you down—but it wouldn't be half as much fun as killing you with my fists!"

Wes stepped back from Booger, and kept stepping back until his back was against the livery. He'd had enough experience with the Lairds to know that they'd both try to rush him if they could. Guthrie Laird had filled out in the last four years. He was bigger than Booger now. Wes noted that fact with dismay. Then he braced himself for Guthrie's charge.

HE CAME in like a bull. Head lowered, fists flailing, and Wes took heart again. He whipped an uppercut to the man's jaw as he thundered in, then side-stepped and let Guthrie plow into the building. Booger Laird was hovering at the fringe of the fight now, watching his chance to rush him.

Guthrie snarled a curse and charged again. Wes couldn't maintain his place against the side of the building. He moved sideways, catching a glimpse of the crowd giving away before him. Then from the corner of his eyes, he saw one man that didn't move. Ollie Myers.

"I'm gonna stomp your guts, Holbrooke!" Guthrie roared and charged. Wes whipped another blow to the man's face and shuffled quickly to one side. And then his feet hit something. He staggered, tried to catch himself. But the thing that had

tripped him moved and he fell down.

It was Ollie Myers' foot. Wes tried to jump over it, but he didn't make it. Ollie had deliberately tripped him. He sprawled in the dust, just as Guthrie wheeled and came at him again. He tried to roll away from Guthrie's swinging boot, and almost succeeded. He grabbed at Guthrie's leg and missed.

This is it, he thought dully, and even in that instant, his mind was trying to piece together a lot of puzzling things. His own dad had said his son wasn't coming back from the war. And then he'd called him a stranger! And Ollie telling him to leave town a while ago—and now tripping him.

He was trying to roll over and regain his feet, but he saw he'd never make it. Guthrie was charging in now. The first kick would knock the wind out of him. Paralyze him so that he couldn't fight off those boots. And Guthrie would kick the life out of him.

"Halt, or I'll fire!"

That barked command seemed to freeze everyone in their tracks. Guthrie poised with one foot in the air. Booger had been rushing in to get in his kicks. He skidded to a stop. Then the crisp voice continued.

"Sargeant, pick that man up! He's wearing an Army uniform!"

Wes rolled over and saw that he was surrounded by blue-coated soldiers. Union troops, their blue uniforms bright and sparkling in the sunlight! He got to his feet unassisted.

"A captain!" The lieutenant, still in the saddle, swore. "By God, this is treason!" He saluted Wes smartly, and automatically, Wes returned it. "Point out the rebels that attacked you, sir, and I'll see that a court-martial—"

"It's not exactly treason, Lieutenant," Wes said wryly. "This is my home town. And this," his laugh was bitter, "is my homecoming!"

The lieutenant bit his lip, undecided. He argued a little, but Wes waved him silent.

"Very well," the officer said. "We'll escort you to your home."

Wes considered that a moment, his eyes shuttling over the taut hostile faces in the crowd. Home! He saw his dad push through the crowd and walk away. Booger Laird's face twisted in a grin. Wes shrugged and started for the hotel. Blue coated horseman, sabers clanking softly,

closed in a tight circle around him.

In his hotel room, he stripped to the waist and sponged off the grime of the fight. His head was whirling from the events of the day, but his body was too weary to stay awake and try to work out a solution. Lassitude crept over him, and he flung himself across the bed and slept.

He came awake in the noise of someone pounding on his door. He started across the room, then hesitated. He lifted the heavy Colt from its holster before he opened the door. The hotel clerk stood there. He carried a worn telescope suitcase.

"One of Lige Holbrooke's riders brought this in a few minutes ago," the clerk said. "There was a message with it."

"Never mind the message," Wes grated and took the bag. He slammed the door in the clerk's face, but the man's voice came through the thin panel.

"The message is that all your belongings are in that bag, and it ain't no use for you to come out to the Double H ranch . . ."

Wes opened the door with a snarl and the clerk retreated hastily. He dumped the contents of the bag on the bed. It contained all his own clothes.

He pulled the old range clothes on; the faded levis, the old blue shirt, high heeled boots with the silver shanked spurs. The bandanna, his hat, and finally, the worn open top holster and belt.

Then he sat down on the bed and cursed. For four years he'd dreamed of the moment when he could take that uniform off, put these old clothes on, and once more be his own boss, instead of just an automaton, obeying orders.

How many nights had he lain in his tent, thinking of this moment? "The minute I shuck these brass buttons and choke collar," he'd thought, "and slip back into my old clothes—right then and there—the war will be over."

Well, he was in his clothes, and the war wasn't over. Not for him, at least. Inaction galled him. He hung the uniform up in the closet and went down to the street.

He ate breakfast in the hotel cafe, trying to get things straight in his mind. And then he thought of Henry Shumate. He remembered Henry leaning out of the buggy and wishing him good luck, that last day in town. He had to talk to Henry.

He paid his check and left the hotel,

angling across the street toward the livery. He was halfway across the street when he became aware of a knot of men gathered in front of the Owl Saloon. Then Guthrie Laird's voice lifted derisively.

"He's changed his clothes, boys," he jeered in a high falsetto. "He's fooled us complete, because now we don't know that he was ever in the army. All you gotta do is change clothes, and nobody will know that you was ever a dirty traitor!"

Wes wheeled around, his hand stabbing for his hip. But before any further move could be made, a door jerked open near the saloon, and a blueclad figure stepped out. It was the lieutenant.

"You there!" He pointed a gauntleted finger at Guthrie Laird. "You're under arrest!"

Wes walked over to the officer. "What's all this, Lieutenant?" he asked. "Isn't this a bit drastic?"

"Perhaps," the lieutenant said in the clipped, impersonal tones of a military man, "but that man Laird—he and his father. They're trouble makers. I've had my eye on them a long time, just waiting. These rebels have got to learn to keep the peace!"

"If you're butting in on my account . . ."

"It's partly that, and partly other things," the lieutenant said. "They know better than attack a man wearing a Union uniform. Yet they jumped you yesterday. And I've been watching them this morning. They were just waiting for you to show up. They planned to goad you into a suicidal gun fight!"

"Maybe it wouldn't have been as suicidal as you think," Wes murmured. Then louder. "I don't want anyone arrested on my account, Lieutenant. And that's an order!"

He'd forgotten he was discharged, and apparently so had the lieutenant. Because he saluted smartly and acknowledged the order. Then he turned to Guthrie Laird.

"If this Captain," he indicated Wes, "comes to any harm, I'm arresting you, Laird, without further evidence!"

Wes swore, but he couldn't bring himself to bawl the lieutenant out. The man was doing his duty. He'd come upon a crowd of rebels yesterday beating an ex-Union soldier. He's stopped it, and he was taking further steps to see that the incident wasn't repeated. That was certainly the way for

the occupying force to act in hostile territory—

He swore as he swung back toward the livery. He was thinking again in terms of the military. And that was over.

CHAPTER TWO

Sixgun Pride

HENRY SHUMATE'S ranch wasn't big, but Henry had managed to prosper in the years before the war. He had plenty of water, and he was a wise cattleman. Wes was shocked at the marks of poverty on the place. He rode up the lane from the road and around the corner of the barn. There was a startled exclamation, and Gretchen Shumate started hurriedly toward the house.

"Gretchen!" he called, but the girl never looked back. He stared at her uncompromising back, and remembering after these four years, the pert tilt of her nose with its saddle of freckles. How her mouth could curve into a smile and her eyes sparkle. And the deep sunset gold of her hair. Now he saw only her back, and the threadbare and patched gingham dress she wore.

He sat there, undecided for a moment, as he rolled a smoke. When he touched a match to it, he was almost decided to ride away. But just then Henry Shumate came out of the blacksmith shop, and lifted a hand in greeting.

"Welcome home, Wes."

He let a lungful of smoke gust out, and there was a tight choking in his throat. "Hen, I never knew how hungry I was to hear those words!"

"I know," Shumate said. "I heard what happened in town yesterday. I figured maybe you'd be out."

"And I've just been considering," Wes said with a bitter look at the house where Gretchen had disappeared, "on riding right on out of the country."

"And admit that you were wrong to fight for the preservation of this country?" Shumate rasped. "You were convinced that this country of ours should stay in one piece when you left here to fight for the North. If you'd let them run you out now, it would be admitting that you was wrong."

Wes nodded. He remembered the long

talks he, Henry Shumate and Ollie Myers had had back when the smoldering fire was first bursting into the flames of war. He had no sympathy for the Confederacy, then, and he had none for it now. But for the people of the south, yes.

"I'd consider staying, maybe," he muttered. "Except—there's dad. He . . ."

"Yeah, I know," Shumate grunted. "But your dad is just downhearted about Dave being killed. He'll get over it."

"Wait a minute!" Wes yelled. "What's this about Dave being killed?"

"You didn't know, Wes? Hell, I'm sorry I brought it up. Went through the whole war, and then got killed in the last few weeks at Richmond."

Wes stared at the man, not knowing what to make of this new revelation. He shook his head.

"I was with Grant at Appomattox," Wes said softly. "Dave's regiment was nearby. I went looking for him, but he'd already been mustered out and had started for home. He should have gotten here more than a month ago."

Henry Shumate's face was grave. He picked up a twig, broke it in two and tossed the pieces aside.

"Ollie Myers brought the news that Dave had been killed around Richmond."

"Ollie Myers came back from the war with the tale that Dave was dead—and then Ollie went to work for Booger Laird—is that right?" he asked.

"That's right," Shumate said. "But there's a lot more happened than just that, since you went away. Do you want to hear it—or do you still plan to ride out?"

"Let's have it—all of it," Wes said grimly.

AN HOUR later, he nodded goodbye to Shumate, climbed into the saddle and rode for his father's ranch. He glanced back once at Shumate's house. For an instant, he thought he saw a face at the kitchen window, a face surrounded by sunset gold hair. But he couldn't be sure, and his thoughts then turned to what Henry had told him.

Booger Laird had used the war to expand his already large holdings. He'd spread out over a lot more territory, and had bought into a lot of business around Salidan.

No one knew where he'd gotten the

money. But there's been talk. Talk of how Guthrie Laird had ridden away to fight, but instead of joining the army, he'd thrown in with Quantrell's guerillas. There'd been mysterious letters and packages received by Booger Laird from his son. And right after the receipt of such a package, Booger would buy up more property.

Only Lige Holbrooke had withstood the man. The Double H ranch had weathered all the pressure Booger had brought against it.

That is, it had weathered the storm until that spring. Right after the surrender, old Lige Holbrooke had decided to take a trail herd north. Texas was crawling with cattle, and Lige figured on taking a herd north and turning beef into Yankee gold.

It would bring cash into a money-starved land, and start the blood of commerce flowing once more.

Booger Laird had scoffed at the idea. All Texas beef were good for, said Booger, was their hides. He was all for driving their surplus cattle to the slaughter houses along the coast, who paid just what the leather was worth. But Lige had persisted. He'd gone in debt up to his neck to get a trail herd gathered, and to buy the supplies a trail crew would need for the long trek northward to the railroad where they could be shipped East.

"Most of us ranchers owed Booger Laird money," Henry Shumate had said. "And if Lige could get that herd north and sell it, it would have given us the money to pay off Booger. Also Lige had borrowed from the bank—run by Booger now—to get the herd together."

And so the herd had trailed north—for one single day.

"Lige and a couple of other men were all that survived the stampede," Shumate had said grimly. "The herd stampeded right over camp—wrecked the chuck wagon and all the food and other supplies. There was so much confusion that nobody was ever sure whether the herd had stampeded naturally—or whether somebody had done it a-purpose. But," his voice was grimmer, "nobody ever saw such a complete stampede. That stampede never stopped till it was scattered beyond all hope of rounding it up."

"Booger, Guthrie and Ollie Myers," Wes muttered, "they all had damn good alibis

the night of the stampede, I guess."

"Sure did," Shumate grunted. "All three of them, and every one of them hard-cases that make up Booger's Flying L crew."

His thoughts broke off suddenly as his mount swung around a bend in the trail. Ahead lay the home he'd known since boyhood. Something choked up inside him at the sight of the long, low 'dobe house, the dusty bunkhouse and other buildings, and the weatherbeaten corrals. It was exactly as he had pictured it on every one of the lonely nights he'd been away from it.

And yet, there was something different, and it took him a moment to realize what it was. It was the listless air of inactivity about the place. The air of poverty that seemed to hang over the buildings, and the deserted look about the place.

He saw not a soul as he rode down the gentle slope and reined up at the corral. He stepped to the ground, and then saw his dad. Lige Holbrooke had watched him ride in, but as Wes looked around, the old man went back to the task of repairing a saddle. Wes walked over.

"Didn't I make it clear yestiddy?" Lige demanded without looking up. "You ain't welcome here. Every time I'd look at you, I'd remember that Dave didn't come home. He fought for the cause I believed in—and he didn't come back. You turned traitor—but you got back all right. You ain't wanted here!"

"Dave got through the war all right, dad," Wes told him quietly. Lige's head jerked up. His mouth was a bitter, thin line.

"What're you trying to do—rub it in?" he snapped. "Trying to make a joke of an old man?"

"You know I wouldn't do that," Wes said. "I'm telling you that Dave was alive at the surrender. He was mustered out of his regiment and started for home—as alive as you and me!"

The old man's hands shook as he laid down the rawhide thongs he'd been working with. The sagging weariness that had marked his face seemed to drop away. It became hard and grim.

"Tell me—what you know."

Wes told him. How he'd been at Appomattox Courthouse, and how, after the surrender he'd talked to one of General Lee's

aides and found out where Dave's regiment was bivouacked. How he'd tried to get right over there, but had become ensnared in the thousand and one details that hamper a man's life in the army.

He'd finally gotten over there a few days later, to find that Dave had already been mustered and had started for home.

"Mebbe it was somebody by the same name?" his dad said hoarsely.

"Not a chance," Wes told him. "The minute I rode into camp, one of Dave's friends recognized me. Came over and asked me if I wasn't kin to Dave Holbrooke. Said the family resemblance was plenty strong. Dave was alive when the war was over, Dad. He's lying dead somewhere between Appomattox Courthouse and Texas!"

"Then it must have been Ollie . . ."

Wes nodded. His brown hand slid to the butt of the big Colt riding his hip. His eyes were bleak as they met his dad's.

"I aim to look up Ollie," he said. "Have a talk with him, and give him his chance to draw."

"Ollie went bad right after you left, son," Lige Holbrooke said softly. "I'd always suspected there was a renegade streak in him. You sorta acted as a balance—to keep him straight. With you gone, well, he just went bad. He was suspected of stealing some horses. Folks were demanding that the sheriff arrest him. That's why he joined the Army. He didn't have no intention of going to fight till then."

Dave had been the first to go, and Ollie, riding home with Dave, had shot Dave somewhere along the trail from Virginia to Texas.

The old man's eyes glittered with hate. He tried to roll a smoke, but his fingers shook so he tore the paper. Then he stood up.

"Help me saddle up, son! We're going to settle with Ollie Myers, and then we're riding out of the country!"

"Ride out?" Wes echoed. "And leave the Double H?"

Lige Holbrooke's laugh was a bitter thing. A jarring, raspy note.

"We ain't leaving the Double H, Wes—it's leaving us!" His shoulders slumped. "I tried to fight Booger off, to keep the ranch going for Dave—and you. But I wasn't big enough for the job. The place

is as good as Booger Laird's right now. I had to let my last man go this morning. Now git saddled up. We got one job to do before we leave!"

"We got more to do than that," Wes said. "We're going to hang onto the Double H. Dave would want us to do it, and I got the stuff to do it with!"

He unbuttoned his shirt, disclosing a heavy money belt that clanked as he touched it.

"Army pay, dad. All in gold."

"Yankee gold—" Lige started bitterly, then checked himself. The anger faded from his eyes; was crowded out by the look of hope in them.

"Enough to gather a trail herd and outfit a trail crew," Wes went on. "And this time we'll take those cattle to the railroad. Turn Texas beef into Yankee gold!"

Lige caught some of his enthusiasm. "By glory, Wes! We'll kill all our snakes with one stomp! When Booger Laird hears we're gathering a trail herd, he'll *have* to try and stop us. He's set to take over half of Texas when mortgages start coming due. And the whole thing will fall like a house of cards if a trail herd gits through and us and the rest of the ranchers git some cash!"

Wes nodded. "And when Booger makes his play, Ollie Myers will be right there to side him."

"Shoot him easy, son," Lige Holbrooke said. "Don't kill that dirty son with your first slug. Let him live long enough to tell whereabouts on the trail he killed Dave. So's we can find where he's buried. And now you git back to town. Hire a crew! Pass the word to the other ranchers—"

"Wait a minute. Not so fast!" Wes laughed. Then he sobered. "I couldn't hire a one legged Mexican in Salidan. Nobody would hire out to a damn Yankee. And if I tried to ride up to any ranch, except Shumate's, they'd throw lead and argue later."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess that's right," Lige said uneasily. "I guess folks felt sorta bad towards—I mean—you got sort of a rep—aw hell! You know what I mean. They's a bunch of fools around here all starched up with their damn pride!"

"It ain't worrying me no more," Wes said. "I can stick it out till they get over it—as long as it's all right between me'n you, dad."

"What's your plan, Wes?"

"You take the money," he said, sliding the money belt off. "Ride into town and hire a good crew. Loan enough of that gold to the other ranchers for them to hire a crew, and use the rest to buy a trail outfit. I'll keep the Double H going till you get back."

Lige nodded and buckled on the money belt. It was past midafternoon before they finished talking over their plans. They'd forgotten all about dinner, and Lige warmed up some beans and coffee before he left for town. It was almost dusk when Wes roped Lige's buckskin and threw the old man's saddle on it.

"I aim to hire a crew and git back to-night," Lige told him. "That empty bunk-house gives me the creeps. I'll ride around and see the other ranchers tomorrow."

WES lifted his hand in farewell and watched the old man ride around the bend and out of sight. There was a vast contentment in him. A twinge of anger aroused him at the thought of Dave, bush-whacked somewhere along the trail by a man he called his friend.

But he shook it off. Life belongs to the living, and Dave's death would be avenged. Meanwhile, he was home, reunited with all the family he had left. Together, he and Lige would rebuild the shattered Double H to its former glory. It would be, he thought, a fitting tribute to Dave.

He looked around at his home, recalling all the dreams he'd dreamed in those dead years before the war. He threw his mind back across the chasm of the conflict and recaptured some of those dreams.

Some, not all. There was a dream he'd once had involving a girl with hair the color of deep sunset. That was gone, and he wondered if there'd be another.

He finished his make and tossed it away, strolling toward the house, as the sun disappeared behind the hills. With one foot on the front steps, he paused. The faint, far away sound of a gunshot reached his ears. It took a moment for him to realize he'd heard it—and the direction from which it had come.

Because it had rolled across the hills to him from the direction Lige had taken to town!

He whirled, broke into a run toward the

corral. He was shaky, and out of practice with a rope, and he swore at the length of time it took for him to rope a mount. He seemed to be all thumbs getting the saddle on, and it seemed ages before he flung himself into the saddle and spurred his horse up the trail. He cursed himself for letting Lige ride into town alone. He was sweating with anxiety when his horse shied suddenly at something ahead in the trail.

He hit the ground at a run, a bitterness welling up inside him at the sight of that pitifully crumpled figure up ahead.

"Dad! Dad!" He dropped to one knee. His dad lay crumpled on one side. He bent low and heard the old man's rasping, laboring breath. Still alive! He started to roll him over and search for the wound. A horse in the brush stamped off to one side of the trail. Wes paid no attention, thinking it was Lige's horse. Something hissed softly through the air, and a rope settled around his shoulders. He jerked to his feet, fighting to throw the rope off, but it whipped tight, then he was jerked off his feet, landing with a jarring thud on his back. The blow knocked the breath from him; stunned him for an instant. And in that hazy moment, he heard voices. Voices that were vaguely familiar, yet he was unable to recognize.

"Start dragging!" a voice said harshly. "One of you—catch his horse! Drag him a ways, then shove his foot in his stirrup and let his own horse finish the job. There won't be no evidence."

He was being dragged along then, and the voices became a jumble of sound. He tried to hold his head up, but his strength was going rapidly, and his head dragged along the ground, slamming into rocks and brush. His back and shoulders felt as if they were being seared with fire. He tried to cry out, but the dust choked him and he could only gag. The pain in his back became more intense; he could feel the skin being ripped—

Then there were shots. Faint and far away, they seemed. Almost as if coming from another world, and it seemed to him that he was no longer moving. There were more shots, and then he was sure that he was no longer moving. A horse galloped close by.

They were coming back for him. He must get away; crawl off and hide in the

brush so they couldn't find him. He rolled over, pushed himself half erect, then blackness swirled around him and engulfed him.

EVENTUALLY, the blackness lifted a little, and he seemed to be living a crazy nightmare. Familiar faces swam dizzily around the room; a room that was familiar, though he couldn't remember where he'd seen it before. And the faces wouldn't stay put long enough for him to identify them. They moved around, swimming in and out of his vision. Voices babbled crazily. And after a while, the darkness settled again; only this time, it seemed to be a peaceful darkness. And when that darkness rolled aside, he was conscious.

He stared at the ceiling of the room, and then around at the walls. He was in his own room, lying on his own bed. He began to remember what had happened, and tried to move. The effort brought pain, and he stifled a groan. The sound brought footsteps to his door.

"Awake, huh?" Henry Shumate grinned from the open door. "About time. You been loafing on that bed for over three days."

"So it was you that drove them off?" Wes asked.

"Well, uh—yeah. I reckon," Shumate grinned. "You see, after you left my place that day, I seen a couple of riders follow you. Sorta looked funny, so I saddled up and rode over your way . . ."

There was a quick flurry of footsteps in the hall, and Gretchen Shumate hurried into the room past her father.

"You know he's not supposed to talk!" she told her father severely. "The doctor . . ."

"The doctor is an old fogey!" Henry Shumate grunted. His daughter silenced him with a look and came over to the bed. "Wes, you've got to be quiet and lie still!"

But something in her eyes told him it would be all right for him to reach up and pull her head down. He was right. She didn't object. Her face came down to his; her lips fastened on his, and he knew that he'd won another victory in this queer war he was fighting. From the doorway, Shumate chuckled.

"You've got to be quiet. Doctor's orders," Gretchen said, flustered by her father's chuckle. "Your back is still raw."

Wes grinned. "Okay, I'll be—Hey, wait a minute! Dad! Dad! What happened to him!"

He came upright in the bed, disregarding the pain that rippled along his back. Gretchen tried to shush him, but he started to get out of bed.

"Henry, what about dad?" he demanded.

"Take 'er easy, Wes," Shumate said from the door. "Lige got a bullet in his side, but he's a long ways from dead. He's in town, Doc wanted him took to town 'cause he had the stuff to operate on him there. Lige is in a hotel room, gitting along fine."

"Now will you take it easy?" Gretchen stamped her foot. Wes grinned and stretched out again.

"What happened, Henry?"

"Nobody knows much," Shumate said. "Lige ain't talked, says he's waiting to see you. And that's about all I know."

"You know about me being drug, don't you?" Wes asked. "You rode up on some gent dragging me at the end of a rope, didn't you?"

Shumate was silent for a long moment, and then he sighed heavily.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," he said heavily. "Like I said, when you left my place, I saw a couple of riders trail you—kinda hanging back so's not to be too close to you. They were too far away for me to tell who they were—but after I thought it over, I saddled up and rode along the trail to the Double H."

"And you saw nothing?"

"Not a thing out of the way," Shumate said. "I started to ride down and say howdy to you and Lige, but it was getting late, and I had chores to do, so I turned around and started home. Then I heard a shot, and I rode back the trail."

"That was the shot that got Lige?"

"Yeah. When I reached him, I heard some brush crashing, and a sound like somebody being drug. I took out after the sound, but Wes, all I found was you hanging by one stirrup from your spooked horse."

"But the shooting?"

"I had to shoot your horse to stop him."

Wes knew that Shumate was telling the truth. The men had dragged him just long enough to take the fight out of him. Then they'd jammed his foot in the stirrup and

give his mount a cut with a quirt. He hadn't remembered them taking the rope off him, but then, everything that had happened was hazy in his mind. He started to swear, remembered Gretchen's presence and gritted his teeth.

"Whatever horse liniment the doc gave you for my back, pour it on double. I got to go to town and see dad!"

CHAPTER THREE

Texan Sixgun Showdown

SALIDAN watched silently as he rode down the street and reined up in front of the hotel. The sun was hot and itchy on his back, even through his shirt and the thin bandages that he still wore. There was some soreness left, but he'd exercised all the stiffness out.

He noticed four horses tied in front of the Owl Saloon. All wore Booger Laird's Flying L brand. The door of the Owl flapped open as he stepped into the street to watch him, but he didn't look back.

The few people in the lobby eyed him silently as he crossed the worn carpet and went up the stairs. His dad was in a corner room at the far end of the stairs. There was a pallor on the old man's face, but he grinned as Wes came in.

"Tell me what happened, dad."

Lige swore. "There ain't much to tell, son. It was Booger Laird himself. He just blocked the trail in front of me and told me to hand over that money belt."

"Money belt?" Wes echoed. "How'd he know about that? I didn't tell anyone that I was carrying any money."

"I heard 'em talking, after I was shot," Lige said. "Seems like you paid for a beer with a gold piece, and Booger figured you might have more. So they watched the ranch with a pair of field glasses. They seen you hand over the belt."

As simple as that, Wes thought. Kill Lige and take the money belt. Then drag him to death to make it look like his horse had boogered at the sight of the dead man in the trail. That would keep the Army lieutenant from carrying out his threat to arrest the Lairds if Wes was killed.

And a wipe-out of the Holbrooke family, Wes knew, would mean more to Booger Laird than all the riches he could amass.

Because if it hadn't been for the Holbrooke family, Booger Laird would have years ago achieved his ambition of ruling a gunsmoke empire. Only the firm hand of Lige Holbrooke, backed by the strength of his two sons, had kept Booger Laird from making a mockery out of law and order years ago.

"Wes?"

"Yes?"

"I heard somebody say that Booger and his men rode into town a little while ago."

"There's some horses in front of the Owl carrying the Flying L brand," Wes said quietly. Lige said no more, and his silence was more eloquent than words could have been. Wes knew what his dad expected of him. It was no more than he expected of himself. It had to be done. He picked up his hat and walked out.

In the hall he stopped and carefully checked the priming of his gun. He loaded the sixth chamber, the one he usually let the hammer rest on empty. Then he dropped the gun back into the holster and walked out.

They'd gone back into the Owl when he stepped out of the hotel. He leaned against a porch post and fashioned a cigarette, while his eyes took in the street. Salidan was watching. There were few people on the streets, but the people watched from the stores and other buildings along the street.

Up the street, the big double doors of the livery were crowded with men ready to dive back inside the moment the shooting started. He turned and looked up the street the other way. A bit of varied colored bunting caught his eye.

It was the Union flag, hanging limp from the building that housed the small garrison of Union troops in Salidan. The place looked deserted, and he remembered that the young lieutenant spent most of the daylight hours riding patrols around the country. He tossed his cigarette away and strolled down the steps.

The loud talk that drifted through the doors of the Owl began to die down as he walked across the street. It muted to a low rumble as he stepped onto the sidewalk, and died completely as he pushed through the batwing doors. He stopped there an instant, until his eyes became accustomed to the dim interior.

"S'matter? You 'fraid to come all the way inside?" Guthrie Laird jeered. He

leaned against one end of the bar, gun jutting forward in its holster; a wolfish grin on his face.

"Sure, come on in, Holbrooke!" Booger Laird boomed. Booger was at the other end of the bar. The whole length of the bar between the two was deserted.

Wes Holbrooke had seen murder setups during his lifetime. He'd seen whipsaw and crossfire traps before. But he'd never seen one this crude before. Booger and his son hugged each end of the bar; the only place for anyone else would be in between them. But that wasn't what shocked Wes so much.

It was the faces of the other people in the bar. A crude setup like this would have turned most men's stomachs, and there ordinarily would have been a look of disgust on every man's face. There was no disgust that Wes could see. It was just the opposite.

"Step right up, Wes!" Booger boomed. "I'd like to buy you a drink!"

"Why, thanks, Booger," Wes said genially and stared slowly for the bar. He threw his glance around the saloon, looking for the one person that was missing. Ollie Myers. Ollie was nowhere to be seen in the tightly packed group of faces along the walls.

And then Wes knew where Ollie was. A balcony ran around three sides of the Owl saloon. Ollie was up there on that balcony. Waiting to make sure there could be no slip up. He felt like laughing. He'd never before seen such an elaborate setup—just to kill one man!

But there it was, and he knew from the look on the faces of the men around the wall, that they'd lie about the whole thing, and would swear at any inquest that it was a fair fight.

Because they had that fool pride that they thought they had to nurse. And that pride was urging them to look to the Lairds for leadership. Without that pride, not a man in the place would have associated with the Lairds, to say nothing of standing by and seeing murder done in this crude manner.

"I'll be obliged to have a drink with you, Booger," he said easily. He reached up with his right hand and shoved his hat back. With his left hand he reached down and unbuckled his gunbelt. Thump!

The heavy holstered gun hit the sawdust floor with a dull thud. Wes stepped away

from the belt and holster and bellied up to the bar. He lifted the glass of whiskey that was already there and tossed it down quickly.

"Thanks, Booger," he chuckled, and then turned to the bartender. "Herb, buy the house a drink with the change from that gold piece." He lifted his hand in an encompassing gesture. "Drink to my health, boys."

Then he turned on his heel and started for the door. Guthrie Laird exploded a startled oath and shoved himself from the bar.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded thickly. "You—you dropped your gun."

"I sure did," Wes said easily. "And it would be murder to shoot a man without a gun, wouldn't it, Guthrie? That army lieutenant would hang you—just like he promised, wouldn't he?"

"Let 'im alone!" Booger Laird snarled. "Git away from him. Holbrooke, I'm giving you your chance to pick your gun up. I'm—"

"And I'm not taking it," Wes said coolly. "I'm not being sucked into your murder game, Booger."

Booger stared for a moment, then laughed. "Yellow, huh?" He waved a big hand. "Well, what the hell difference does it make? Either way you're finished in this damn' town. Dead or alive—you're still finished!"

"Hardly," Wes told him. "You see, I'm going to turn you over to the Army. Have you arrested for shooting dad and trying to drag me to death. And there ain't a damn thing you can do about it!"

He put his hand against Guthrie's chest and pushed him to one side. He strode through the batwing doors and into the street, walking fast, because he didn't want anyone to see the red flush of shame that lit his cheeks.

He walked fast, but not fast enough to escape the bitter profanity that was hurled after him. Not too fast to escape the open sneers the town heaped on him as he walked across the street to the hotel.

"... damn yaller coward ..."

"... a dirty traitor to the end ... hiding behind them damnyankee friends of his ..."

"... gitting them murdering sons to do the gun-chore that he's too yaller to do ..."

He strode up the hotel steps, across the

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porch and into the lobby. He paused in the lobby and asked the clerk a low-voiced question. The talk on the sidewalks became louder now, swelling to an excited babble of voices. He strode grimly along the hall and pushed the door to his dad's room open. And he saw that old Lige Holbrooke had heard the talk drift up from the sidewalk.

Lige was blinking fast to squeeze back the tears of shame and rage. As Wes came in, he turned his head toward the wall. Wes sat down and smoked a cigarette. The silence built up until it was unbearable.

"I'd druther you'd gone down fighting!" the old man burst out. "At least the name of Holbrooke woulda meant something then—and I'd had a chance to go after them when I get up!"

"Even if I didn't have a chance to git a single one of them?" Wes asked softly.

"Yes!" Wes was shocked at the bitterness in his dad's tones. "Dave didn't have a chance, did he?"

Wes opened his mouth to speak, but somehow, he couldn't find the right words. He ground out his cigarette and rolled another. Lige stood the silence for a while longer, then spoke again:

"You ain't aiming to go through with it, are you? I mean you ain't gonna add more shame to yourself by trying to turn 'em over to the army?"

Wes started to explain, and a slight sound at the door attracted him. He walked over and flung it open. The hotel clerk was hurrying down the hall. He returned to his chair, and then remembered that these hotel walls were paper thin, and that someone could be in the next room.

"That's what I told 'em I was going to do," he said stonily, "turn 'em over to the army."

"Hell!" Lige exploded. "It's a fifty fifty chance that they won't let you get to the army office alive. And if they do—do you think they'd ever be convicted? Everybody in Texas would lie to save them?"

"The hotel clerk said that army patrol usually gets back to town about four," Wes said. "It's almost that now."

Lige turned his face to the wall again and said no more. And in the silence that followed, Wes heard a faint scraping in the room next door. So he had been right,

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after all! Every word that had passed between Lige and him had been overheard. He smiled. He's expected that there would be eavesdroppers. This was the biggest thing that had ever hit Salidan, and folks would want to hear every word! It would furnish conversation for years to come.

AND then he heard the pound of horses' hoofs, intermingled with the old familiar sound of sabres rattling in their scabbards. Faintly, he heard crisp commands.

The patrol was back.

He stepped over to Lige's bed and lifted down the gunbelt and holstered gun that hung on the post. Lige paid no attention as he buckled it on, nor at the snick! click! as he tested its mechanism and the priming. Then he was gone, stepping softly out of the room and pulling the door shut after him.

Salidan was out on the sidewalks now. Lined up almost as if for a parade. He felt their eyes on him, and could almost feel the impact of their hatred. He walked slowly across the hotel porch and down the steps.

The door of the Owl banged open.

"There he goes, boys!" Booger Laird's jeering voice crowded out the silence. "The brave hero—a-going to git the whole damn army to side him!"

Guthrie Laird swaggered out of the Owl and took his stand beside Booger. "Boy, I sure am scairt! Here I'm gonna be arrested—and I just know I ain't got a chance of proving that I'm innocent!"

A ripple of laughter ran up the street, just as the Owl door opened once more. Ollie Myers had that same old grin on his face as he came out. Wes walked slowly down the hotel steps and across the sidewalk. Ollie looked almost slim and boyish alongside the big hulks of the Lairds.

"Ain't you gonna say your piece, Ollie?" Wes called with a chuckle.

"That's right, you're expecting me to make a joke, ain't you, Wes?" Ollie laughed. "Should have known you'd have expected that of me. I always knew what you were thinking, Wes. I always did. And I ain't been wrong yet."

Wes teetered on the edge of the sidewalk. A chill had settled over the crowd. People who had lined the sidewalks to heap sneers

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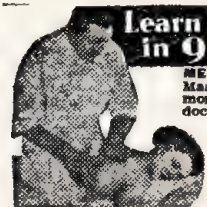


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on a man who was showing his cowardice,
began to edge back and slip behind shelter.

"Then maybe you figured that I didn't
aim to go to the Army," Wes said quietly.

"Sure I figured it, Wes," Ollie laughed.

"You wouldn't want the Army in on this.
But you had to get out of that whipsaw deal
inside. I don't blame you. That was pretty
raw. Kinda turned my stomach, Wes. Yep,
you had to get out of that deal somehow."

"What the hell you yammering about?"
Booger Laird blustered, but there was a
hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"Hell, don't you see, Booger?" Ollie
went on, chuckling. "Old Wes had to git
us all bunched together—like we are now."

"Damn you, if you knew that why
didn't—" Guthrie blared, but Wes cut him
short.

"I figured the two kingpins would come
swaggering out to watch the show. They'd
have to come out and shoot off their big
mouths. They'd come blundering out all
bunched together and making good targets.
But I didn't know about you, Ollie."

"Never missed a good joke in my life,"
Ollie laughed. "And this sure is a good
joke on us."

"Maybe. We'll wait and see," Wes said
and fell forward.

Booger roared and snatched for his gun.
Wes hit the dust of the street a belly-
whopper, his gun clear of leather. Booger's
gun was clearing, when Wes got his own
gun lined up and pulled the trigger. He
heard the lead slap meatily into Booger's
stomach, and turned the gun toward
Guthrie.

Guthrie was trying to run sideways; to
gain the door of the Owl. Wes snapped a
shot at him, then rolled over quickly as
Ollie's gun spat flame. He felt Ollie's bullet
plow into his leg, then he fired again at
Guthrie. Guthrie was halfway through the
door. The lead slug sort of froze him there
for an instant, then he sagged loosely into
the Owl.

Ollie was firing again. Wes felt a bullet
rip his arm and turned his gun toward
Ollie. Ollie got off one more shot. It tore
out a chunk of Wes' cheek. Then Ollie took
lead in his chest. He tried to grin, but blood
seeped out of the corners of his mouth, and
turned the grin into something ghastly. He
dropped his gun and sat down carefully on

YANKEE GOLD BUYS TEXAS HELL!

the edge of the sidewalk, holding his chest with both hands.

Wes got to his feet. He took one step and his leg collapsed. He crawled across the street. He could hear the uproar of the crowd dinning in his ears, and the shrill voice of the army lieutenant, as the small garrison raced toward him. Ollie grinned as Wes dragged himself closer.

"I'm sorry, Ollie."

"Hell, I ain't. I been hating myself ever since I let Booger talk me into . . ." His eyes clouded and he swayed. Wes grabbed him to steady him.

"Ollie! There's something . . ."

"I know . . ." he was growing weaker by the second. "It's Dave—I kinda figured this would—turn out this way—I told Herb the bartender where Dave is bur . . ." His head fell forward.

THE doc picked the lead out of Wes and they took him home to the Double H.

It was a week before he could sit up, and by that time, Lige was up and around. The oldster stomped into Wes' room one morning, as Gretchen was tucking the covers around Wes securely.

"Woman, if you'd quit pampering him he'd git well in time to trail north with us!" old Lige said grumpily. "Fact is, I think the other ranchers want to elect him trail boss."

"He'll be well enough to take the herd north," Gretchen said crisply. "He's going to get well soon enough to take another trip before that!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Lige snorted.

"And with that blessing, we'll start our honeymoon," Wes laughed.



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(Continued from page 31)

walked to the crumpled form of Carmody and stood over him. The man looked gnome-like and deformed, face down on the floor.

"I guess you won't have much more trouble on your trip to Rawhide, Sterrett."

Griff still had a hard time getting it straight in his mind.

"Then you weren't really . . ."

Taylor laughed. "You thought I was out to get you! No, I'm the deputy Sheriff Haney set to watch over you. I know he told you, because I was standing right in his back room listening. You were sure hell to watch. Go away from me at the saloon, and again from the Gold Bar House. Then downstairs. I watched from my upper bunk and saw Carmody slip out to get you—the quiet way, with a Bowie. I tried to put a slug in him, but he was too foxy. And after two shots I was afraid I might get you by mistake."

"I feel like a fool!" muttered Sterrett.

"But you're alive, and you'll testify tomorrow at that Rawhide court. It takes more guts to go up against the Cattleman's Association than it does to hunt a dull-witted killer in the dark."

Taylor struck a second match and held it over Carmody to make certain no bit of life was left in him. As he did he whistled by habit,

"They feed in the coulee
They water in the draw . . ."

He flipped the match aside and asked, "Say, what is that tune? It's been running through my head all night."



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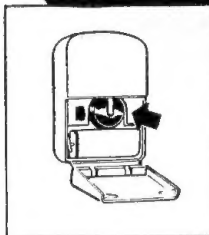
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